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THESIS

**DOWNSTREAM ON THE MEKONG: CONTRASTING
CAMBODIAN AND VIETNAMESE RESPONSES TO
CHINESE WATER CONTROL**

by

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VIETNAMESE RESPONSES TO CHINESE WATER CONTROL**

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ABSTRACT

Decreasing supplies of fresh water, growth of the global population, and the transnational nature of much of the world's water resources have made global competition over water increasingly common. In Southeast Asia, Chinese hydroelectric dams at the Lancang Cascade have enabled China to control the headwaters of the Mekong River and threaten downstream states' access to this vital resource. Cambodia and Vietnam are two Southeast Asian states whose economic prosperity is inextricably linked to undisturbed access to the Mekong. Despite similar requirements for river usage, the two states have responded to Chinese control in surprisingly different ways.

This thesis investigates the different Vietnamese and Cambodian responses to China's Mekong River development by analyzing their requirements for the Mekong River and contrasting each state's relationship with China. The thesis finds that Cambodia has developed a strategy of appeasement toward China, placing its short-term interests in Chinese economic assistance ahead of its long-term requirements for riparian productivity, while Vietnam has balanced against the super power, demonstrating the resolve to protect its riparian interests. Similarly, the two states both use institutions to offset the super power's significant size and power advantages, providing them an alternative path to shape China's actions.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFC	Asian Financial Crisis
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMI	Chiang Mai Initiative
CNRP	Cambodian National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
DoC	2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
ELC	economic land concession
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	foreign direct investment
GDP	gross domestic product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
LMC	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation initiative
LMCM	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism
LMI	Lower Mekong Initiative
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MW	megawatt
NBCFA	Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement
NIC	National Intelligence Council
SOE	state-owned enterprises
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VWP	Vietnam Workers' Party

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION AND FINDINGS

As China has pursued regional dominance of Southeast Asia, it has used its possession of the headwaters of the Mekong River to monopolize transnational water resources that its Southeast Asian neighbors depend upon for economic survival. Cambodia and Vietnam are two representative Southeast Asian states whose economic prosperity is inextricably linked to undisturbed river access. As a result, one would expect both countries to respond to Chinese control of the river in similar ways, yet significant differences are readily apparent. In general, Sino-Cambodian relations have been amicable, as the two countries frequently support each other on disputed regional and international issues that result from the amount of economic assistance Cambodia receives from China. In contrast, Sino-Vietnamese relations have been more complex as Vietnam has repeatedly challenged Chinese efforts to infringe upon its territorial sovereignty while using institutions to shape Chinese behavior on the Mekong. To understand the differences in relations, this thesis analyzes the following question: what factors explain the different strategies Cambodia and Vietnam have employed in their relations with China to maintain traditional access to the Mekong River?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The significance of this research is twofold. First, due to the decreasing supply of water and simultaneous growth of the human population, competition over water resources is anticipated to increase. The Mekong River basin is a striking example of water competition as upstream Chinese demand for renewable energy has increased China's desire for hydroelectric power and caused it to develop an extensive series of dams, known as the Lancang Cascade, along the Mekong River. Since its development, the Lancang Cascade has altered the river's normal flow, impacted important fish reproductive patterns, and intensified the effects of annual drought and flood cycles on agriculture, leaving downstream states dependent upon Chinese goodwill for their agricultural and economic survival. Unfortunately for downstream states, China's impact

on Mekong River water is expected to increase significantly over the coming decade as it increases its total number of dams in the Lancang Cascade from six to fourteen to more effectively harness the control of more than 70 percent of the river's dry season flow.¹ This control of the Mekong has given China a crucial foreign policy advantage as it shapes its relationships with Cambodia and Vietnam and has created important implications for the development of each country's relationship with China.

Second, competition over Mekong River water provides an important setting from which to explore how smaller states respond to competition from larger, more powerful states. By holding the trump card of water control, China has put itself in position to play the role of benefactor to its downstream neighbors or threaten water restriction as its preference dictates. In response, neorealist international relations theory would lead academics to predict that given this dilemma, the smaller countries of the Mekong basin would react in similar ways as the common need for water drives their response to Chinese water competition. As research has shown, this has not been the case. This thesis focuses on exploring why these two countries with similar water requirements have responded differently to Chinese competition, and the analysis will serve as a useful prism to gain insight into transnational water politics in general and the relationships that drive large- and small-state foreign relations.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

To find a solution to the research question, this thesis reviews two major sources of literature. First, a significant population of political scientists and strategic thinkers has begun to address the growing trend of water competition as a source of conflict. Control of water resources has become a key driver of inter and intrastate instability across the globe, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, but also in water-rich areas such as peninsular Southeast Asia, where control of the Mekong River has become a significant source of transnational competition. The second body of literature concerns the bilateral

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia in Figures – AQUASTAT Survey – 2011," Water Report 37, 2011, 4, http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/basins/mekong/mekong-CP_eng.pdf; Sigfrido Burgos and Sophal Ear, "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia: Influence and Resources," *Asian Survey* 50, no. 3 (May-June 2010): 624, doi: 10.1525/as.2010.50.3.615.

relationships that exist between both Cambodia and Vietnam with China. Each country has reacted to the reality of Chinese river control in different ways, and the motivations that determine their separate courses of action are described in the literature below.

1. Global Water Politics and Regional Water Requirements

Water is predicted to become an increasing source of global instability in the coming years as world population and standards of living increase. To define how this source of instability is expected to contribute to conflict, the U.S. National Intelligence Council's (NIC) 2012 report, "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds," provides an in-depth analysis of future water requirements and estimates the impact these needs will have on global conflict. Anticipating that by 2030 global demand for water is expected to increase by 40 percent as the global population increases from 7.1 to 8.3 billion people, the report acknowledges that water may well become "a more significant source of contention than energy or minerals at both the intrastate and interstate levels."² Similarly, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) 2015 annual "World Threat Assessment" echoes these sentiments by finding that "increased water related social disruptions" will affect both rich and poor countries alike.³ As a result, water politics has become an increasing source of international concern as states struggle to ensure access to this dwindling resource. In particular, two regions receive special consideration due to a combination of factors that make them especially vulnerable to water-related conflict.

First, the Middle East stands out for its lack of water reserves and growing population. Since the 1970s, the Middle East has depended upon imports to feed its citizens because it lacks sufficient water reserves required to grow its own food.⁴ This problem has placed the region in a precarious position and exacerbated the tendency of Middle Eastern states to resort to violence to ensure water access. As a result, the Middle

² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2012), iv, 66, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf.

³ James R. Clapper, "Statement for the Record, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," February 26, 2015, 12, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf.

⁴ J. A. Allan, *The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 5.

East has witnessed extreme competition resulting in repeated violent conflicts over water. Citing examples such as the Israeli-Arab Six Day War, Dr. Thomas Naff, Professor of Cultural History at the University of Pennsylvania, acknowledges the propensity for violence that occurs when strong downstream states believe their water resources are threatened.⁵ In addition, the cases of Egypt and Sudan demonstrate that peaceful solutions generally do not last, as the 1959 Sudan-Egyptian Treaty regulating Nile River use demonstrates.⁶ A bilateral agreement between Sudan and Ethiopia that placated the water requirements of both states for 50 years, the treaty failed to acknowledge the rights of neighboring upstream states that have increasingly sought more inclusive solutions.⁷ Recently, these smaller, upstream states joined together to limit Egypt's monopolization of water resources under the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (NBCFA), increasing tensions and potential for conflict as Egypt maintains its rights to the preponderance of the river's resources.⁸

Separately, water politics in Asia are largely typified by the relationship that exists between those states that have control of river headwaters in the Tibetan Plateau and dependent states downstream that do not. Professor Brahma Chellaney identifies this disparity in water control and allocation in his book, *Water: Asia's New Battleground*. In his book, Chellaney seeks to draw attention to Asia's plight as the most water insecure region in the world. Identifying key factors such as the possession of three-fifths of the world's population and availability of only half of the global per capita average of available fresh water, Chellaney makes the case that Asia could eventually become a perfect storm of water-related conflict.⁹ In the case of China, Chellaney argues that no

⁵ Thomas Naff, "Conflict and Water Use in the Middle East," in *Water in the Arab World: Perspectives and Prognoses*, ed. Peter Rogers and Peter Lydon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 280.

⁶ Daniel Hillel, *Rivers of Eden: The Struggle for Water and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 125.

⁷ Nizar Manek, "Unstable Power Structure, Regional Disagreement, and Water Policies Along the Nile," *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1, 2014. <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1520251672?accountid=12702>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Brahma Chellaney, *Water: Asia's New Battleground* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 1.

country in the region stands as well equipped to weather future water conflicts. China's possession of the strategic Tibetan Plateau's, "vast glaciers, hundreds of lakes, huge underground springs, and high altitude have endowed it with the world's greatest river systems," and created an area that holds more freshwater than any place on earth with the exception of the two poles.¹⁰ Inextricably linked to China by this water source, South, Central, and Southeast Asia find themselves dependent upon maintaining good relations with the regional power to ensure their water supplies are not disrupted.

In Southeast Asia, the Chinese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese rely extensively upon the Mekong River for the sustainment of their populations. Anticipating the potential for future conflict and need to share the Mekong River's vast economic potential, the leaders of Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand, and Vietnam established the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in an effort to "jointly manage the shared water resources and the sustainable development of the Mekong River."¹¹ However, the lack of a mechanism to compel member state behavior has impeded the MRC's ability to enforce established normative behaviors. For example, in an effort to develop its own hydroelectric energy program, Laos has disregarded MRC efforts to keep the main stem of the lower Mekong undammed, raising fears of a significant disruption to the river's fish harvest.¹² Furthermore, China's refusal to become more than a simple dialogue partner to the commission has weakened the commission's authority. As the river's most powerful user, China has consistently maintained its ability to make unilateral decisions outside the MRC framework.¹³

Despite its inability to establish and enforce normative behaviors, the MRC is a useful organization for collecting and analyzing riverine data and promulgating reports sensitive to the river's long term sustainability. To understand regional and state dependence upon the Mekong River, MRC reports were analyzed to determine the river's

¹⁰ Chellaney, *Water*, 97.

¹¹ "About MRC," Mekong River Commission, n.d., <http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-mrc>.

¹² Luke Hunt, "Mekong River Commission Faces Radical Change," *Diplomat*, January 22, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/mekong-river-commission-faces-radical-change>.

¹³ Evelyn Goh, *Developing the Mekong: Regionalism and Regional Security in China-Southeast Asian Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 45.

significance to China, Cambodia, and Vietnam and their dependence on fish harvests, agriculture, and hydroelectric power production.¹⁴ The annual reports from 2012 and 2014 provide updates on existing river conditions and ensure that riparian trends are collected and readily available for public analysis.

Similarly, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations provides a detailed and highly informative assessment of water usage for the riparian states that border the Mekong River.¹⁵ This UN report collects, analyzes, and disseminates water data by country and provides a useful point of comparison to validate MRC report accuracy. Finally, to understand the extent of Chinese dependence upon the river and to determine the key domestic drivers of its Mekong river policy, the Paulson Institute's article, "Rebalancing China's Energy Strategy," is referenced for its detailed description of the energy issues that have caused China to seek hydroelectric energy as a means of supplementing its massive domestic energy requirement.¹⁶

A perspective that emphasizes asymmetry anticipates that as the larger, more powerful state, China is more easily able to make unilateral decisions when developing the river, and as a result, Cambodia and Vietnam are "subject to the hegemony of the stronger state."¹⁷ This idea is given credence by the aforementioned Chinese refusal of membership in the MRC, becoming a mere "dialogue partner," with no legal responsibilities to the multilateral organization.¹⁸ China's strategic position and size also enable it to achieve regional objectives with downstream neighbors. By creating dependencies through the provision of goods and resources connected to the river or through coercion through the restriction or increase in the amount of water leaving the

¹⁴ Federico Rodriguez, "Mekong River Commission: Annual Report 2014," March 31, 2015, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/governance/MRC-Annual-Report-2014.pdf>.

¹⁵ FAO, "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia."

¹⁶ Damien Ma, "Rebalancing China's Energy Strategy," Paulson Papers on Energy and Environment, Paulson Institute, January 2015, 27.

¹⁷ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁸ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 38.

Lancang cascade, China maintains the advantage and is able to influence behavior of its downstream neighbors.¹⁹

Despite realist predictions that this power advantage should be met by balancing behavior from the two smaller states, Cambodia and Vietnam have pursued separate strategies.²⁰ Generally, Cambodia has sought to maintain or improve its relationship with China, making itself an indispensable partner that reinforces Chinese interests in return for Chinese economic assistance.²¹ In contrast, Vietnam has pursued a more complex strategy in its overall relations with China. Despite a proven track record of balancing behavior in the South China Sea that demonstrates its willingness to counter China and protect its interests, Vietnam has chosen to focus the majority of its efforts on the institutional approach to resolve issues it has with Chinese dam development.

2. China's Bilateral Relations with Cambodia and Vietnam

For a historical perspective on the causal factors that shape Chinese perceptions of its place in the region, Garver's *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, analyzes China's historical legacy as an early great power with a renewed nationalist fervor that has driven the regime to reestablish itself as a modern great power.²² In a contemporary account of Chinese efforts to nurture a more positive and friendly image as it transitions towards global leadership, Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive*, stands out. Its detailed description of Chinese application of soft power to achieve foreign policy objectives stands in contrast to typical *realpolitik* explanations of China's rise and quest for regional domination.²³ Similarly, Evelyn Goh focuses on China's attempt to promote, "regional cooperation, regional institutions, and regional integration," as a means of

¹⁹ Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests," 622.

²⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 126–27.

²¹ Pheakdey Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations: A Positive-Sum Game?" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012): 77; Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests," 620.

²² John W. Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 2–28.

²³ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

positively shaping its relationship with its Southeast Asian neighbors.²⁴ Using the Mekong River as a medium for enhanced regional cooperation, Goh provides an optimistic assessment of China's ability to promote stability through interdependence and institutional ties.²⁵

Observations on Sino-Cambodian relations have created a broad assortment of opinions to explain why state relations between the two countries have remained positive despite almost universal recognition of Cambodia's oppressive authoritarian regime. To explain this phenomenon, Richardson takes an idealist's approach, acknowledging that despite strong international protest of Cambodia's authoritarian practices, China has continued to support Cambodia politically and economically as a result of Cambodia's adherence to China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.²⁶

Ear makes the argument that Cambodia has been unable to truly benefit from massive international aid programs and direct investment from countries such as China because it has developed a dependence on foreign assistance. This dependence has led to rampant governmental corruption and retarded economic growth that has weakened rather than strengthened its economy and caused Cambodia to become increasingly dependent upon international handouts.²⁷ Heng echoes these sentiments by conducting a more thorough assessment of Chinese foreign aid and investment in Cambodia, making the point that Cambodia reciprocates Chinese aid by providing a source of political support on the Southeast Asian peninsula. The unforeseen cost associated with this relationship is also marked by Heng who acknowledges that the heavy reliance on Chinese monetary support has greatly increased concerns of a loss of autonomy in Cambodian decision-making.²⁸ Similarly, Burgos and Ear conduct a thorough review of China's strategic interests in Cambodia and argue that Cambodia has remained, "a

²⁴ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 7–8.

²⁶ Sophie Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: Principles and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 12.

²⁷ Sophal Ear, "The Political Economy of Aid and Governance in Cambodia," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (2007): 1, doi: 10.1080/02185370701315624.

²⁸ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 77.

compliant ally of Beijing ever since it was clear that mutual benefits existed.”²⁹ Finding that security and stability in the region can be enhanced by the bilateral relationship, Burgos and Ear note that “[b]y fostering bilateral cooperation and strengthening the Cambodian economy, in exchange Beijing gets to leverage its influence to mediate regional conflicts.”³⁰

In contrast to neorealist thought, Goh takes an institutionalist perspective, by describing the pursuit of regional ties by Cambodia and China through multilateral organizations. Acknowledging that China’s position on the Mekong River has set conditions for increased competition from its downstream neighbors, Goh posits that China has pursued access to several multilateral organizations because it realizes its river development plans must “take shape in the context of a greater commitment to regional cooperation with Southeast Asia.”³¹ Similarly, she argues that China’s downstream neighbors also see regionalism as important because multilateral ties enhance their collective bargaining positions and reduces their dependence upon stronger, neighboring states.³²

Sino-Vietnamese relations have had a more turbulent history. To understand the factors that led to the current bilateral relationship, Hiep describes the normalization of Sino-Vietnam relations that followed nearly two decades of hostility. Hiep’s argument that “changes in Vietnam’s foreign policy in general and its China policy in particular originated first and foremost from the Vietnamese Communist Party’s domestic agenda of promoting economic reform and protecting regime survival,” mirrors the work of Vuving.³³ Vuving’s belief that Vietnam is simultaneously fearful of Chinese aggressiveness yet dependent upon Chinese support for regime stability presents the two-sided approach to contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations common among many

²⁹ Burgos and Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests,” 616.

³⁰ Ibid., 620.

³¹ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 20–21.

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Le Hong Hiep, “Vietnam’s Domestic-Foreign Policy Nexus: *Doi Moi*, Foreign Policy Reform, and Sino-Vietnamese Normalization,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 5, no. 3 (July 2013): 1, doi: 10.1111/aspp.12035.

Southeast Asian scholars.³⁴ Carl Thayer takes a similar position by remarking upon the Vietnamese attempt to balance “cooperation” and “struggle” with China on key foreign policy issues that includes the establishment of intricate economic ties while simultaneously conducting extensive military modernization to ensure Vietnamese freedom of action.³⁵

Finally, Brantly Womack makes an important contribution to the study of asymmetry in foreign relations, arguing that the weaker state will “always be more attentive to the relationship than vice versa because proportionally it is more exposed to the risks and opportunities,” the relationship can provide.³⁶ Seeking to uncover how this principal plays out in Sino-Vietnamese relations, Womack attempts to debunk traditional realist notions of power politics by acknowledging that in this relationship China has not always gotten what it wanted despite its overwhelming strength.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The problem tackled by this thesis is to explain the separate strategies employed by Cambodia and Vietnam to maintain traditional access to the Mekong River. To do so, this thesis evaluates two hypotheses. First, is the neorealist expectation that given their similar position vis a vis China, the two downstream states should essentially adhere equally to the balancing behavior predicted by neorealists. Generally, neorealist thought holds that as China strengthens its control of the river, the two smaller countries should react in similar ways as the need for reliable river access drives a common response. Given the smaller countries’ heavy reliance upon the river for their economic survival and Chinese attempts at control, Waltz predicts that “secondary states, when they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side” and form balancing coalitions against their stronger competitors.³⁷

³⁴ Alexander L. Vuving, “Vietnam in 2012: A Rent-Seeking State on the Verge of a Crisis,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2013): 337, doi: 10.1353/saa.2013.0008.

³⁵ Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 33, no. 3 (December 2011): 348.

³⁶ Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 2.

³⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126–27.

Rather than forming a “balancing coalition” against China or building its military to protect its interests on the Mekong, this thesis finds that Cambodia has instead developed a strategy of appeasement with China. Though recognized by neorealists, this strategy of appeasement is cited as not useful to states because “conceding power to a rival state is a prescription for serious trouble in an anarchic system.”³⁸ This appeasement strategy has likely developed as a product of Cambodia’s increasing reliance upon Chinese economic assistance and goodwill. As a cost of this exchange, Cambodia has given up much of its bargaining power and has passively accepted China’s efforts to control the Mekong River. In contrast, Vietnam displays neither the appeasement strategy of Cambodia nor the balancing response expected by neorealists. Despite Vietnam’s improvements to its military capabilities and increased engagement with the West in response to Chinese threats to its sovereignty in the South China Sea, Vietnam has made little effort to directly confront the super power over its actions on the Mekong.

The second hypothesis evaluated through this research is that Cambodia and Vietnam use institutions in similar ways to counter Chinese power and increase their leverage in the region. Smaller states often rely upon regional and international institutions to create mechanisms to increase state cooperation, establish norms, and on occasion, provide coercive force to shape state behavior.³⁹ Examples of this behavior by Cambodia and Vietnam are found in the rapidity with which both states have joined organizations such as the Mekong River Commission, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the United Nations.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis uses a comparative case study approach, comparing the differing strategies of Cambodia and Vietnam to Chinese control of the Mekong River in an effort to increase understanding of the drivers of state response to the problems of water control by a larger, more powerful neighbor. The Mekong River serves as a useful medium with

³⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (W. W. Norton, 2001), 139.

³⁹ Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 162.

which to compare the differing strategies because the extent of Cambodian and Vietnamese reliance upon it for their economic and agricultural survival is quantifiable and well understood. Similarly, the thesis chose the cases of Cambodia and Vietnam because the distinctiveness of their responses to Chinese water control provides a unique opportunity to better understand large and small state relationships.

This thesis uses an assortment of sources such as books, scholarly journals, and magazine and newspaper articles to complete the comparison. The Open Source Enterprise website provides translated Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian documents to assist in obtaining otherwise unavailable responses of the three countries to matters concerning the research question. In addition, this thesis uses reports from the Mekong River Commission and United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization to establish third party assessments of each country's river usage.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis is divided into five chapters using the comparative case study format to systematically explore the differences in strategies that Cambodia and Vietnam have used to ensure traditional access to the Mekong River. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter II describes China's domestic imperatives for river usage and its foreign policy with Cambodia and Vietnam. Chapter III analyzes Cambodia's river needs, its response to Chinese attempts to control the Mekong River, and a description of what has led Cambodia to respond as it has. Chapter IV is similar to Chapter III in structure and provides an assessment of Vietnam's river needs, its response to Chinese efforts at river control, and explores the causal factors that have led it to react as it has. Chapter V concludes the research and outlines likely policy choices Cambodia and Vietnam will make to ensure sustainable access to the Mekong River.

II. DOMESTIC DRIVERS OF CHINESE ACTIVITIES ON THE MEKONG

Figure 1. Tributaries of the Mekong⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Source: “Tributaries of the Mekong,” digital image, *Wikipedia*, last modified January 15, 2017, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a0/Mekongbasin.jpg>.

This chapter examines the domestic imperatives that drive Chinese dam development. Of utmost importance to the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the requirement to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese populace. Since the late 1970s the CCP has maintained regime legitimacy by raising the country's standard of living with unprecedented growth in excess of eight percent per year.⁴¹ Recently though, threats to CCP legitimacy have become apparent. An important example is demonstrated in the regime's ability to consistently acquire sufficient energy resources required to fuel the country's rapid economic growth. For years, Chinese imported energy has fed its industry, but rising global energy prices and political instability in major oil and gas producing regions have caused it to seek energy elsewhere. Likewise, China's dependence upon these carbon-rich resources has facilitated both massive pollution and the idea that the CCP is unable or unwilling to fix the unsafe living conditions the majority of Chinese find themselves living in.

To counteract these perceptions and maintain its grip on power, the CCP has embarked on the world's largest clean energy program to take advantage of its domestic ability to create energy to maintain high levels of economic growth and reduce the pollution that has caused it both domestic and international embarrassment. Impressive on almost any scale, China's 2017 promise to spend more than \$360 billion on renewable energy infrastructure by 2020 underscores its commitment to fixing its energy woes and provides insight into the direction that China's hydroelectric planning will take well into the future.⁴² To fully understand the domestic drivers that have led China to pursue hydroelectric dam development, this paper will first describe the geographic landscape that has enabled the Chinese to take advantage of the vast hydroelectric potential of the Lancang River. Next, this chapter will describe the timeline associated with China's development of the Lancang Cascade. Finally, this chapter will describe the domestic factors that have driven China's wholehearted pursuit of hydroelectric development to the detriment of its downstream neighbors.

⁴¹ Bill McKibben, "Can China Go Green?" *National Geographic*, June 2011, 120.

⁴² Michael Forsythe, "China Aims to Spend at Least \$360 Billion on Renewable Energy by 2020," *New York Times*, January 5, 2017.

Possession of the Tibetan Plateau has enabled China to control an area whose vast glaciers, lakes, and underground springs contain more fresh water than any other place on earth, minus the two poles.⁴³ From this plateau springs the Lancang Jiang River, known throughout the world as the Mekong. Beginning its course as a glacial stream high in the Tibetan Plateau in China's Qinghai Province, the Mekong flows through China's Yunnan Province where it records nearly 90 percent of its 18,000 feet fall to sea level.⁴⁴ After leaving China, the river runs through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia before finally entering the South China Sea through the Mekong River delta in Vietnam. The river's rapid descent through China's Yunnan Province makes the province an ideal location for the generation of hydroelectric energy, so the Chinese have built a cascade of seven dams, with 21 more planned to harness the river's energy.⁴⁵ This location has strategic implications for China, primarily because control of the Lancang Cascade enables China to control as much as 70 percent of the river's dry season flow, but also because the terrain surrounding the cascade is uniquely suited to the capture of vast amounts of the river's water vital for hydroelectric power generation.⁴⁶

Chinese leaders have long held interest in developing their country's vast hydroelectric potential. Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong, was a prime figure in initiating plans to develop China's major rivers, but successive domestic misadventures such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolutions during the mid-20th century handicapped the state's ability to move forward with those projects.⁴⁷ It was not until Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping's, economic reforms in the late 1970s that China developed the capacity to move forward with its ambitious hydroelectric plans. Since, China has built some 22,000 dams throughout the country, a number that equates

⁴³ Chellaney, *Water*, 97.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 103; Richard Cronin, "Mekong Dams and the Perils of Peace," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 51, no. 6 (2009): 150, doi: 10.1080/00396330903461716.

⁴⁵ Hoang Duong, "Understanding the Impacts of China's Upper Mekong Dams," *World River's Review* 29, no. 4 (December 2014): 15, https://www.internationalrivers.org/sites/default/files/attached-files/wrr_dec_2014_71.pdf.

⁴⁶ Cronin, "Mekong Dams," 150.

⁴⁷ Phillip Ball, "The Chinese are Obsessed with Building Giant Dams," *BBC*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20151014-the-chinese-are-obsessed-with-building-giant-dams>.

to roughly half the world's hydroelectric total.⁴⁸ Chinese efforts to tap the vast potential of the Lancang River were slowed by the inaccessibility of the region, difficult terrain, limited infrastructure, and distance to load centers, but by the late 1980s, planning for the Lancang Cascade was well underway.⁴⁹ In 1995, the 1,500 megawatt (MW) Manwan dam came online, ushering in the era of dam development on the Mekong.⁵⁰ As shown in Table 1, following the completion of the Manwan, six other dams of varying size and volume were completed near China's southern border with Myanmar in China's Yunnan province.

Table 1. Completed Dams of the Lancang Hydroelectric Cascade⁵¹

Dam Name	Installed Capacity (MW)	Annual Output (TWh)	Start Date	End Date	Dam Height (m)	Reservoir Volume (billion m ³)
Manwan	1,500	7.80	1986	1995	132	1.06
Dachaoshan	1,350	6.70	1997	2003	120.5	0.88
Xiaowan	4,200	18.89	2002	2012	292	15.13
Jinghong	1,750	7.93	2004	2011	107	1.23
Nuozhadu	5,850	23.68	2005	2017	260	22.74
Gongguoqiao	750	4.06	2006–2007	2015	130	0.51
Ganlanba	155	0.90	N/A	2015	60.5	0.072

⁴⁸ Charlton Lewis, "China's Great Dam Boom: A Major Assault on its Rivers," *Yale Environment 360*, November 4, 2013, http://e360.yale.edu/feature/chinas_great_dam_boom_an_assault_on_its_river_systems/2706/.

⁴⁹ Darrin Magee, "The Dragon Upstream: China's Role in Lancang-Mekong Development," in *Politics and Development in a Transboundary Watershed: The Case of the Lower Mekong Basin*, ed. Joakim Öjendal, Stina Hansson, and Sofie Hellberg (Netherlands: Springer, 2011), 175.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Adapted from Magee, *Dragon Upstream*, 175.

Several domestic factors have led China to pursue rapid expansion of its hydroelectric program. In particular, today, diversification of its energy portfolio, development of its impoverished western regions, reduction of pollution, and desire to improve trade with downstream neighbors drive Chinese efforts to control the Mekong River. In its 2012 Energy Policy, China publicly announced its goal to “build a modern energy industry that is secure, stable, economical, and clean in order to provide a solid guarantee for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and make greater contributions to the world’s economic development.”⁵² Under these official parameters, China has developed hydroelectric energy on the Mekong River.

The most important domestic imperative is the CCP’s need to develop a broad array of energy sources to fuel the state’s economic engine. Renewable energy resources, such as hydroelectric power, help China diversify its energy portfolio and reduce its dependence upon imported sources of energy that are subject to unstable global pricing fluctuations. In addition, since much of China’s hydropower projects occur in its poor western provinces, efforts there have the added benefit of facilitating development of those areas.⁵³ A third factor surrounding Chinese development of the Mekong is political rather than economic in nature. As a result of nearly forty years of rapid economic development, Chinese leaders have sought to correct the current trend of environmental degradation it has suffered by developing renewable and clean sources of energy. A subject of both domestic public protest and international pressure, the rampant pollution that affects China has become a source of intense embarrassment for the ruling Communist regime. Finally, the Lancang Cascade has greatly improved China’s ability to trade with downstream neighbors by decreasing transit times and costs associated with getting Chinese goods to downstream ports. This trade has had much larger benefits for the Chinese whose closely guarded technical knowledge of recent river clearances and control of the dams provides them with a distinct advantage in river navigation and

⁵² “Full Text: China’s 2012 Energy Policy,” Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, October 2012, http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2012-10/24/content_2250497_5.htm.

⁵³ Bhajan S. Grewal and Abdullahi D. Ahmed, “Is China’s Western Region Development Strategy on Track? An Assessment,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 69 (2011), doi: 10.1080/10670564.2011.541626.

accounts for the wide disparity in Chinese freight vessels along the river.⁵⁴ The following section examines each of these imperatives in more detail.

A. ENERGY DIVERSIFICATION

Since the economic awakening China experienced following the normalization of relations with the United States, the CPC has staked its legitimacy upon its ability to effectively manage the Chinese economy and deliver sustained economic growth to its growing population.⁵⁵ Over this period, China has grown from one of Asia's poorest countries to a global power boasting the world's second largest economy, creating nearly 13 percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP).⁵⁶ As China's economy has grown with unprecedented rapidity, the energy consumption required to fuel this growth has caused numerous challenges for Chinese leadership. Massive by any standard, China's energy needs continue to grow at an astonishing rate, requiring the addition of the equivalent of the United Kingdom's total yearly power consumption annually to keep pace with its growth.⁵⁷ As a result, Chinese leaders have aggressively pursued alternative sources of energy to supplement energy shortfalls and alleviate energy security concerns.

China's share of global energy resources is small when compared to its growth requirements. This lack of domestic energy resources required to fuel its economy drives China to pursue alternative forms of energy. Domestic per capita shares of coal, oil, and natural gas translate to roughly 67 percent, 5.4 percent, and 7.5 percent of global averages and have led to Chinese dependence upon massive energy imports that leave it susceptible to threats to its energy security.⁵⁸ For example, as the world's largest importer of both coal and oil, China is subject to unpredictable global price fluctuations, rising costs associated with dwindling supplies of nonrenewable resources, and political

⁵⁴ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 30.

⁵⁵ Mike Glosny, "Chinese Foreign Policy," lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, August 31, 2016.

⁵⁶ Ma, "Rebalancing China's Energy," 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁸ Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, "China's 2012 Energy Policy."

volatility within key coal and oil producing regions.⁵⁹ Predicting further increases in consumption of imported energy, China's 2012 Energy Policy noted the "grave challenges to energy security" it will continue to face as its already low energy resources grow smaller while energy requirements mount.⁶⁰ As a result, Chinese leadership has looked internally at domestic, renewable forms of energy such as hydropower to diversify its energy portfolio and reduce its dependence on volatile foreign energy imports.⁶¹

China's pursuit of hydroelectric energy on the Mekong has facilitated the achievement of both of these tasks, substantially reducing its dependence on imported energy, which, in turn, has helped to decrease its energy security concerns. Widely regarded as a highly efficient resource lacking the storage problems that plague wind or solar technologies, China is particularly suited to take advantage of hydroelectric energy because it possesses an estimated 22 percent more hydroelectric potential than the next highest nation's total.⁶² As early as 2011, China generated more than 230 million kilowatts of electricity per year from hydropower, ranking first in the world.⁶³ Proving its commitment to fully exploiting its available hydropower assets, China added additional dams over the next five years, so that, by 2016, its hydropower capacity reached more than 319 million kilowatts.⁶⁴ China's hydropower development on the Mekong River provides an important contribution to this hydropower development scheme. As China's second most productive hydropower site, the Lancang Cascade produces approximately 15,700 megawatts annually, roughly equivalent to 70 percent of China's Three Gorges

⁵⁹ "International Energy Statistics," U.S. Energy Information Administration, Department of Energy, 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IeDIndex3.cfm?tid=1&eyid=2012&syid=2012&reverseAxes=0&cid=&cid=r1&cid=r2&cid=r3&cid=r4&cid=r5&cid=r6&cid=r7&cid=ww&pid=1&aid=24&unit=TST>.

⁶⁰ Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, "China's 2012 Energy Policy."

⁶¹ Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests," 622.

⁶² Solidance, "Hydro Power in China," *Ecology Global Network*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.ecology.com/2013/03/28/hydro-power-in-china/>.

⁶³ Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, "China's 2012 Energy Policy."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Dam, the largest hydroelectric dam in the world.⁶⁵ Hydropower development has played a large and ever increasing role in improving China's energy security and has also figured into Chinese plans to develop its rural interior provinces.

B. DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN PROVINCES

Second, the development of the Lancang Cascade is a central component of China's Western Development Strategy. Originally conceived in 2000 by then Premier Zhu Rongji, the CPC designed the Western Region Development Strategy, or the "Go West" campaign to reduce the development gap that existed between the rich industrial East and its impoverished western provinces.⁶⁶ By creating large energy infrastructure projects to draw resources, capital, and people to western energy hubs, Chinese leadership hopes to improve standards of living in poverty-stricken areas and to create a "prosperous and advanced new West, where life is stable, ethnic groups are united and the natural landscape is beautiful."⁶⁷ Subsequent leadership has re-emphasized these efforts. For example, Premier Zhu Rongji, in his explanation of his party's tenth five year plan, acknowledged that "the implementation of the Western Development Strategy is of great significance to the country's strategic goal of building a well-to-do society in all areas of life in the new century."⁶⁸ By developing the western provinces through "shovel ready projects" such as the Lancang Cascade, CPC leadership hopes to "bring investment and development to China's lagging west while satisfying the growing electricity needs of the country's eastern provinces," effectively killing two birds with one stone.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Pichamon Yeophantong, "China's Lancang Dam Cascade and Transnational Activism in the Mekong Region: Who's Got the Power?" *Asian Survey* 54, no. 4 (July–August 2014): 708–9, doi: 10.1525/as.2014.54.4.700.

⁶⁶ Grewal and Ahmed, "China's Western Region," 161–63.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Premier Zhu Rongji's Explanation of 10th Five-Year Plan Drafting," China Internet Information Center, n.d., <http://www.china.org.cn/e-15/15-3-g/15-3-g-1.htm>.

⁶⁹ "China's West-East Electricity Transfer Project," Wilson Center, China Environment Forum, n.d., <http://wilsoncenter.org/wilsonweekly/chinas-west-east-electricity-transfer-project.html>, first quoted by Gregory J. Knott, "China on the Mekong: Legitimacy Imperatives and Policy Case Studies" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), 29.

Important as these developments have been for the Eastern provinces, attempts to develop the Western provinces have imposed significant social costs on the inhabitants of those regions, particularly for the native, ethnic minorities who reside along the river. As dams on the river are built, the Chinese government forces inhabitants who live near the river into resettlement areas, disrupting their lives, significantly impacting the ability of those inhabitants to make a living. In a 2016 study, Dr. Drew Gerkey noted that “credible evidence of an association between [Yunnan’s] population resettlement and diminished social capital in China’s hydropower sector.”⁷⁰ These negative effects fall heavily upon the more vulnerable ethnic minorities who reside along the Lancang River and lack the means to influence political decision-making.⁷¹ Furthermore, jobs that the CCP originally touted as beneficial for the economic development of the West have been short lived. As dams have been completed, jobs available to local residents have quickly dried up. With an estimated 15 million resettled nationwide over the past few decades, previously muted voices have grown louder.⁷² Aided in large part by international protest at China’s treatment of these impoverished citizens and by increased domestic outcry at unfair resettlement policies, the CCP has begun to slowly adjust its relocation plans for future developments.

C. POLLUTION REDUCTION

Third, China’s development of hydroelectric energy is also shaped by the need to develop cleaner forms of energy necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and lessen the rampant pollution that plagues the country. As a result of the “grow at all costs” strategy China undertook to transform itself into a global power, Chinese leadership encouraged the use of unregulated and easily available coal as the principal fuel for its economic growth. Unfortunately for China, the use of coal has produced incredible amounts of pollution, accounting for some “90 percent of China’s SO₂ emissions and 70

⁷⁰ Brian Tilt and Drew Gerkey, “Dams and Population Displacement on China’s Upper Mekong River: Implications for Social Capital and Social-Ecological Resilience,” *Global Environmental Change* 36, no. 1 (January 2016): 153, doi: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.11.008.

⁷¹ Ibid., 158.

⁷² Ibid., 153.

percent of its CO₂ emissions.”⁷³ As a result of the effects this pollution has had on Chinese citizens and the implications that increased greenhouse gasses have on global warming, China has experienced both domestic and international pressure to reform.

Chinese pollution has created domestic problems for CPC leadership. For example, rampant pollution has created the impression in many Chinese citizens that the regime is unable to provide clean air—an essential public good. One example of this occurred in 2015 when “at least 80 percent of China’s 367 cities with real-time air quality monitoring failed to meet national small particle pollution standards,” during that year’s first three quarters.⁷⁴ Pollutants from coal and other non-renewables are widely blamed for the more than 1.2 million premature deaths annually and increased respiratory health complications.⁷⁵ Rampant pollution is also a key factor in the disparity in life expectancies between industrialized and rural areas within China, as people living in industrial areas live nearly five and a half years less than those living in rural areas.⁷⁶ These statistics have not gone unnoticed by the Chinese. Widespread belief in the CPC’s inability to respond to this domestic issue has created perceptions of illegitimacy within parts of the Chinese population, exemplified by growing social unrest and protests.⁷⁷ Growing in size each year, large-scale protests eventually led to regime recognition and change with Premier Li Keqiang’s call for a “War on Pollution,” further escalating efforts to develop renewable resources.⁷⁸

Furthermore, as the world’s largest producer of greenhouse gasses, China has faced significant global pressure to curb its pollution and consumption of nonrenewable resources. Pressure from the international community has largely stemmed from China’s disproportionately high contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. According to 2011 global emissions estimates by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),

⁷³ Ma, “Rebalancing China’s Energy,” 9.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Albert and Beina Xu, “China’s Environmental Crisis,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 18, 2016, 2, <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-environmental-crisis/p12608>.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

China produces approximately 28 percent of global CO₂ emissions, nearly double that of the next highest state.⁷⁹ Pressure from other states has also come as a result of the more obvious effects that large amounts of pollution has on China's neighbors. Affecting many of its Asian neighbors with both smog and acid rain, the effects of Chinese pollution have also extended as far as the western United States.⁸⁰ As a result, engaging China and gaining its participation has become a top priority for international efforts to combat global climate change, prominently showcased by China's recent agreement to join the Paris climate change summit, a broad international agreement created to reduce global greenhouse emissions.⁸¹

As a result of these domestic and international influences to curb pollution, China has committed to addressing heretofore unchecked environmental degradation and to gradually lessening its dependence upon nonrenewable sources of energy. China's intention to meet international agreements and provide clean air for its citizens is clearly stated in its Twelfth Five Year Plan, which details China's commitment to combat global warming, stating that "massive reductions in energy consumption intensity and carbon dioxide emissions should be regarded as binding targets to efficiently control greenhouse gas emissions."⁸² Since the Twelfth Five Year Plan was written, China has quickly begun the modification of its energy profile and expects non-fossil fuels to account for more than 15 percent of its energy mix by 2020, with hydroelectric energy comprising the vast majority of non-fossil fuel energy.⁸³ Eager to embrace its newfound status as a global power and conscious of its global image as a perennial polluter, China is sensitive to images of its cities covered in coal-produced smog and has moved rapidly to increase hydroelectric output to reduce its carbon footprint.

⁷⁹ "Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, last modified August 9, 2016, <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data>.

⁸⁰ Albert and Xu, "China's Environmental Crisis," 4.

⁸¹ Graham Rayman, "U.S., China Agree to Join Paris Climate Change Agreement to Cut Carbon Emissions," *New York Daily News*, September 3, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/u-s-china-agree-join-paris-climate-change-agreement-article-1.2777117>.

⁸² People's Republic of China, "China's Twelfth Five Year Plan (2011–2015)," trans. Delegation of the European Union in China, May 11, 2011, <http://cbi.typepad.com/files/full-translation-5-yr-plan-2011-2015.doc>.

⁸³ Ma, "Rebalancing China's Energy," 13.

D. INCREASE TRADE WITH DOWNSTREAM NEIGHBORS

Finally, China has sought to improve trade with downstream states by reducing obstacles that have limited trade between China and its neighbors. Upstream river navigation has long been a hazardous endeavor on the Mekong due to the numerous rapids that restrict navigation; however, since dam construction began, China has been able to regulate the river's flow, enabling multi-season large boat navigation and the clearance of more than 330 kilometers of shoals, reefs, and rock obstacles. Since this 2004 clearance, China has been able to navigate the river with trading vessels as large as 500 tons, selling goods in river ports downstream throughout the year.⁸⁴ Additionally, clearance of the river has significantly facilitated trade for China, especially in Yunnan province, by reducing shipping costs by up to one-third while reducing shipping time by nearly a week when compared to the much more circuitous route to the same destinations through the South China Sea.⁸⁵ As a result of this increase in shipping efficiency, trade has accelerated between China and its downstream neighbors. For example, in the year following China's clearance of obstacles on the upper Mekong in 2004, Chinese exports through the Thai border at Chiang Rai on the Mekong River more than doubled.⁸⁶ Furthermore, improved trafficability along the upper Mekong has provided China with an alternate shipping route to the Malacca straits.⁸⁷

E. CONCLUSION

Growing domestic requirements to diversify its energy portfolio, develop its impoverished western regions, reduce wide-scale pollution, and improve trade with downstream neighbors have led China to pursue wide-scale hydroelectric development of the Mekong River. By decreasing its dependence upon imported sources of energy, China has greatly increased its energy security and limited its susceptibility to volatile oil

⁸⁴ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 29.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; "Mideast Oil to be Shipped up the Mekong," *AsiaNews*, January 12, 2007, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=8216>; Daniel Workman, "Top Thailand Exports," *World's Richest Countries*, 2016, http://www.worldsrichestcountries.com/top_thailand_exports.html.

markets. Additionally, the development of hydroelectric power plants in the impoverished Yunnan province has strengthened CPC legitimacy by bringing much needed capital and jobs to the region. The development of the Lancang Cascade has also been a critical factor in China's ability to regulate river levels necessary for increased trade with downstream neighbors. Finally, hydroelectric energy has also enabled China to begin the process of pollution reduction necessary to fulfill the CPC's responsibility to its citizens and the global community.

These actions have not come without drawbacks, as demonstrated by the environmental damage to the heavily agrarian and fishing intensive economies of Vietnam and Cambodia. Downstream, Cambodia and Vietnam have reacted in different ways to these developments. In the next chapter, Cambodia's response to the threats posed by Chinese dams on the Mekong River will be examined. Generally, these threats have done little to break the tight bonds that have developed between Cambodia and China as a corrupt, authoritarian Cambodian regime under Hun Sen has largely ignored the significant threat posed by Chinese activities. In contrast, chapter four will describe how Vietnam has remained sensitive to the threats posed by Chinese hydroelectric development and has hedged against these and other Chinese threats by employing a wide-range of geopolitical tools at its disposal.

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III. CAMBODIAN RESPONSE TO CHINESE HYDROPOWER DEVELOPMENT ON THE MEKONG



Figure 2. Mekong River in Cambodia⁸⁸

This chapter examines the specific relationship between China and Cambodia and seeks to understand how Chinese control of the Mekong River has influenced Cambodia's relationship with the regional power. To do so, this chapter will describe the importance of the river to Cambodia's economic and agricultural survival, describe the advantages that a friendly Cambodia provides China, define the ways that Cambodia has responded to Chinese development and control of the Mekong River, and assess the response strategy Cambodia has employed to maintain positive relations with China. In

⁸⁸ Source: "Mekong River Map," digital image, La Historia con Mapas, last modified 2015, <http://www.lahistoriaconmapas.com/atlas/landkarte-welt/Kambodscha-Fluss-Karte.htm>.

particular, this chapter will show that despite Chinese actions along the Mekong River that are destructive to Cambodia's long term health and growth prospects, the dependencies that have been created by Chinese patronage have produced an environment where Cambodia has traded long-term productivity and environmental sustainability for short-term economic gain. As a result, Cambodia has cooperated with China and facilitated its manipulation of the Mekong River despite the negative long-term effects cooperation may one day bring.

A. CAMBODIA'S RIVER NEEDS

In order to understand how Cambodia has responded to Chinese control of the Mekong River, it is important to first understand the significance of the river to Cambodia's economy and its people as well as how the Lancang Cascade has disrupted Cambodian activities downstream. For centuries, Cambodia's fate has been tied to the health of the river, and its people rely heavily upon the Mekong to provide a wide assortment of life sustaining activities necessary to support its population. The river's most important function for the Cambodian people is to provide fish for consumption. Of all the states that share the Mekong, Cambodia is arguably the most dependent upon the river for its economic wellbeing.

Cambodia's reliance on the Mekong River as a driver of economic growth is demonstrated by a Mekong River Commission study that attributes approximately 12 percent of Cambodia's GDP, or \$300 million annually to the 400,000 tons of fish harvested from the river each year.⁸⁹ Not simply an important part of the Cambodian economy, fish from the Mekong reportedly provide as much as 80 percent of the average Cambodians' dietary protein and is a crucial source of their calcium and Vitamin A. Due to this reliance, changes to the river's normal flows caused by upstream Chinese dams have the potential to have disastrous effects on Cambodia's citizens and economy that depend so heavily upon the river for their livelihoods. With a population of more than 15

⁸⁹ K.G. Hortle, S. Lieng, and J. Valbo-Jorgensen, *An Introduction to Cambodia's Inland Fisheries*, Mekong Development Series No. 4 (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Mekong River Commission, 2004), iii, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/report-management-develop/Mek-Dev-No4-Mekong-Fisheries-Cambodia-Eng.pdf>.

million people, Cambodia's percentage of the river's annual haul of more than 2.3 million tons of fish per year is substantial and is expected to rise as its population grows.⁹⁰ Due to this dependence upon Mekong River fish and the fragility of the riverine ecosystem, downstream states and communities are faced with a considerable amount of risk from the environmental changes the Lancang Cascade has caused the river.

More than 60 percent of the basin's population have occupations tied directly to the Mekong River and are especially vulnerable to potential river changes and environmental degradation from upstream dams.⁹¹ Chinese hydroelectric dams in the Lancang Cascade have already begun to change the river and affect fishing in several key ways. First, the cascade disrupts fish breeding and feeding habits. Higher water levels than normal in the dry season and lower water levels than normal in the monsoon season, combined with colder than average water temperatures from deep reservoir releases, disrupt fish habitats and impede breeding cycles.⁹² Several Mekong River basin states have already reported substantial declines in fish harvests of up to 50 percent.⁹³ According to Goh, "higher water levels during the dry season that do not expose rapids in the middle section of the river, and lower water levels in the flooded forests of southern Laos and Cambodia in the wet season, will diminish crucial spawning and nursing grounds for migratory fish."⁹⁴ In a region where significant portions of the population live at or below the poverty line and have little access to goods from other areas, these reductions can be catastrophic to local communities, and in Cambodia's case, catastrophic to the nation. Ultimately, by disrupting fish spawning and nursery sites, this situation is likely to prove disastrous for the fishing industry, one of Cambodia's most profitable and dependable sources of revenue.

⁹⁰ FAO, "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia," 6.

⁹¹ Ibid., 2.

⁹² Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 48.

⁹³ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁴ Evelyn Goh, "China in the Mekong River Basin: The Regional Security Implications of Resource Development on the Lancang Jiang," Working Paper No. 69, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, July 2004, 5, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/27145/WP69.pdf>.

Both fishing and agriculture in downstream states are negatively affected by Chinese regulation of the river because the Lancang Cascade disrupts seasonal flow rates by releasing more water than would typically be in the river during the dry season and holding more water behind the cascade during the wet season. Claiming that its ability to reduce wet-season river flow by 17 percent and increase dry-season flow by as much as 40 percent will be a benefit to downstream states, China misunderstands downstream reliance upon Mother Nature to set conditions for successful agricultural production.⁹⁵ One way Cambodian farmers depend upon seasonal river fluctuations of the Mekong River is to provide irrigation for the production of rice to feed its growing population. Rice is commonly characterized as the world's thirstiest grain crop and per capita, Cambodia consumes between 130–180 kilograms per year, as much as any other country in the world.⁹⁶ The vast majority of Cambodia's rice production is used for domestic consumption, but recently, Cambodia has begun exporting a significant amount, with 378,856 tons sold abroad in 2013 alone.⁹⁷ As a result, Cambodia's demand for water has increased and is expected to do so well into the future. Due to the late development of modern farming techniques and immature irrigation systems that typify its agricultural infrastructure, Cambodia has been responsible for only about three percent of an estimated 62 km³ of water drawn annually from the river for irrigation.⁹⁸ As Cambodian farming modernizes over the coming years and foreign demand for Cambodian rice increases, much like fish consumption, demand for irrigation to feed Cambodia's rice demand will continue to grow.

Another key agricultural function the river facilitates is the deposit of sedimentation. Historically, Cambodian farmers have relied upon the vast amounts of sediment the river delivers during the yearly monsoons to fertilize their fields. This natural method of soil fertilization is particularly beneficial to poor countries such as

⁹⁵ Richard Cronin, "Mekong Dams," 151.

⁹⁶ Chellaney, *Water*, 35.

⁹⁷ Luke Hunt, "Cambodia Looks to Put Its Rice on the World's Plate," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/business/international/cambodia-looks-to-put-its-rice-on-the-worlds-plate.html?_r=0.

⁹⁸ FAO, "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia," 7.

Cambodia whose farmers often have little access to manufactured fertilizers common in more developed countries. Prior to the development of the Lancang cascade, approximately half of this sediment originated in China before it washed down the Mekong and onto farmers' fields, creating a natural and highly fertile source of soil replenishment.⁹⁹ Following the development of the dam system in China, this sedimentation has been halted as it makes its way down the river, reducing both the lifespan of the Chinese dams as well as the fertility of the Cambodian rice fields.

Furthermore, farmers and fishermen alike rely upon the annual monsoonal flood pulse to wash pollutants from the river that accumulate during the dry season.¹⁰⁰ As industrialization along the river increases in conjunction with Cambodia's economic growth, pollution of the river has as well. Lacking institutions frequently found in first world nations that regulate pollution and protect the environment, Cambodia's farmers and fishermen are forced to rely totally upon the annual floods to move pollutants out and maintain the river's health. The steady state manner of water release typical of hydroelectric dams prevents this in large part and will limit this natural means of pollution control.

Finally, over the millennia, crop varieties have evolved in conjunction with seasonal river patterns and require normal river operations to thrive. In Cambodia, nearly 80 percent of planted rice varieties have become dependent upon regular annual floods.¹⁰¹ Absent these yearly events, new rice varieties must be developed to facilitate production rates needed to feed its growing population. This change in crop variety can be an expensive process as money must be allocated for crop variety research, development, and distribution. In an area that typically produces enough rice to feed more than 300 million people annually, any change to traditional river usage can have devastating impacts upon the region.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Goh, "China in the Mekong," 5.

¹⁰⁰ Cronin, "Mekong Dams," 152.

¹⁰¹ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 48.

¹⁰² FAO, "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia," 6.

B. CHINESE INTERESTS IN CAMBODIA

China has carefully nurtured its ties with Cambodia to exploit unique economic, political, and geostrategic opportunities that Cambodia's location and political environment offer. First, Cambodia provides China with several unique economic opportunities ranging from the provision of much-needed natural resources important in the manufacture of Chinese products to the expansion of China's export market for Chinese goods.¹⁰³ Exploitation of these factors has the added benefit of providing additional opportunities for Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE), many with exceedingly tight links to high-ranking members of China's government.

Cambodia is a source of many natural resources that Chinese firms require to produce goods for domestic and international sale. As described in the previous chapter, Chinese manufacturing has been a key driver of China's rapid economic growth. Natural resources from impoverished, resource rich countries such as Cambodia have become crucial components for the manufacture of Chinese goods. As a result, China has done its best to control the sources of these goods whenever possible. One-way China exerts influence and increases its control over the sources of Cambodia's natural resources is through the use of economic land concessions (ELCs) leased to it by the Cambodian government. In Cambodia, ELCs are a big business, with more than 73 percent of the country's arable land devoted to foreign country use.¹⁰⁴ Of this total, according to a report by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, "more than 50 percent of land concessions granted since 1994—totaling 4.6 million hectares—were given to Chinese companies to invest in mining, hydropower, and agriculture in Cambodia."¹⁰⁵ These ELCs provide Cambodia with a steady source of income as rents are paid, but they have also caused the, "forcible displacement of many communities and transformed thousands

¹⁰³ Carlyle A. Thayer, "China's Relations with Laos and Cambodia," in *China's Internal and External Relations and Lessons for Korea and Asia*, ed. Jung-ho Bae and Jae H. Ku (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013), 190.

¹⁰⁴ Khatharya Um, "Cambodia in 2013: The Winds of Change," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2014): 104, 113.

¹⁰⁵ Pheakdey Heng, "Chinese Investment and Aid in Cambodia a Controversial Affair," *East Asia Forum*, July 16, 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/16/chinese-investment-and-aid-in-cambodia-a-controversial-affair/>.

of Cambodians from subsistence owner-cultivators to low wage laborers, eking out less than U.S. \$2–3 a day.”¹⁰⁶ Similar to enabling the Chinese to control the river, Cambodian provision of land and resources to Chinese companies is yet another example of Cambodia placing the pursuit of short-term economic gain over the long-term health of its resources and people.

Cambodia also presents China with a destination for cheap, manufactured Chinese goods. With a population nearing 16 million, annual population growth of approximately 1.56 percent per year, and economic growth of at least eight percent per year since 2000,¹⁰⁷ Cambodia is an established and lucrative market for Chinese exports. This is particularly appealing to China because the CCP is dependent, in large part, upon economic growth as a mechanism to facilitate regime stability. With 40 percent of China’s GDP dependent upon its ability to gain and maintain markets for its exported goods, China must continue to exploit opportunities for market expansion whenever possible to ensure continued economic growth.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, Chinese SOEs that rely on Mekong basin natural resources or are involved in the export of goods have immense sway within the highest levels of the Chinese government and pursue commercial opportunities with “weak and corrupt governments in the Lower Mekong with little or no restraint.”¹⁰⁹ According to Heng, as recently as 2012, “an estimated 23 Chinese state owned enterprises [were] exploring mineral resources, five [were] constructing hydropower dams, and hundreds more [were] investing in the garment industry,” within Cambodia.¹¹⁰ With backing from the CCP and a willingly exploited Cambodian government that has prized profit over sustainability, these state-owned companies have successively tightened their grip on Cambodia’s resources, ensuring that export markets remain open and natural resources continue to move north to waiting Chinese manufacturing centers.

¹⁰⁶ Um, “Cambodia in 2013,” 113.

¹⁰⁷ “The World Factbook: Cambodia,” Central Intelligence Agency, last modified February 26, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Heng, “Cambodia-China Relations,” 70.

¹⁰⁹ Cronin, “Mekong Dams,” 154.

¹¹⁰ Heng “Cambodia-China Relations,” 60.

Second, China has carefully developed a close relationship with Cambodia in an effort to create a political ally supportive of its more controversial initiatives. Since its establishment as a Communist state under Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949, China has been viewed with suspicion by many in Southeast Asia and often for well-founded reasons. Throughout the mid to late 20th century, the CCP provided both direct and indirect support to Communist insurgencies in many Southeast Asian countries.¹¹¹ These efforts increased instability in the region as the colonial era ended and native governments began the arduous process of establishing new forms of government. This support also caused significant damage to China's regional reputation. With the passing of Chairman Mao and entrance into the global economy in the 1970s, China has attempted to moderate this damage by making a concerted effort to increase cooperation in Southeast Asia. In particular, Chinese actions during the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) and participation in numerous regional institutions such as the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) and ASEAN +3, provided proof to its Southeast Asian neighbors that China could put self-interest aside for the greater good of the region.¹¹²

Despite this change in China's behavior, the regional power continues to run afoul of international norms on a variety of issues. A significant example is China's claims to territory in the South China Sea, where, "China's pursuit and defense of its maritime claims has worsened ties with many states in Southeast Asia."¹¹³ Conflict caused by China's regional assertiveness has done much to reinjure its reputation in the region and led many states to the assessment that China is intent on regional domination at their expense. One way China has attempted to rectify this situation has been through the patronage of poorer nations, such as Laos and Cambodia that often voice support for China at the regional or international level. This has paid off for China as, "China can

¹¹¹ Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 69.

¹¹² Joshua Kurlantzick, "ASEAN's Future and Asian Integration," International Institutions and Global Governance Program Working Paper, Council on Foreign Relations, November 2012, 5, 8, http://i.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/IIGG_WorkingPaper10_Kurlantzick.pdf.

¹¹³ M. Taylor Fravel, "Things Fall Apart: Maritime Disputes and China's Regional Diplomacy," in *China's Challenges*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 210–11.

always count on Cambodia's full cooperation in dealing with political resistance," to its efforts in the South China Sea, and elsewhere.¹¹⁴ In this task, Cambodia has played its part as a spokesman for China only too well as later evidence will show.

Third, strong ties with Cambodia accomplishes a geostrategic purpose for China by establishing a Southeast Asian buffer state against Western encroachment and as a key cog in China's "string-of-pearls" plan to ensure reliable access to extra-regional resources and facilitate Chinese activities in the Gulf of Thailand and South China Sea. Similar to its reasons for pursuing the build-up of islands in the South China Sea, a friendly Cambodia provides China with strategic defensive depth, placing greater distance between itself and potential adversaries. This depth has become even more important to Cambodia following the U.S. pivot to Asia. The U.S. focus on Asia in general and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in particular has caught China off guard.¹¹⁵ By keeping Cambodia in its pocket, China reduces its vulnerability to increased U.S. influence in the region and limits the effectiveness of the U.S. pivot.

China's string of pearls initiative, sometimes referred to as the "One Belt, One Road" plan that links itself to vital ports in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East facilitates access to vital sources of energy and ports of trade.¹¹⁶ By investing heavily in the strategic Cambodian port of Sihanoukville, Chinese government officials plan to improve the port's infrastructure and increase its ability to improve transport of goods to and from China.¹¹⁷ Reinforcement of the Sihanoukville port has other benefits. As Heng describes, Chinese access to these ports "provides an excellent base for projecting maritime power into the Gulf of Thailand and the Straits of Malacca."¹¹⁸ Not mentioned by Heng but readily apparent is the utility this port will have in providing China with additional sea-basing and an alternate route for its warships to

¹¹⁴ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 72.

¹¹⁵ Cronin, "Mekong Dams," 156.

¹¹⁶ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 73.

¹¹⁷ Sok Chan, "Chinese Investors Focusing on Sihanoukville Port," *Khmer Times*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/17010/chinese-investors-focusing-on-sihanoukville-port/>.

¹¹⁸ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 74.

access the South China Sea, undoubtedly of vital importance as that conflict increases over the coming years.

C. RELATIONSHIP BENEFITS FOR CAMBODIA

Despite its dependence on the Mekong River and the effects that Chinese actions have had on its economic livelihood, Cambodia has largely supported Chinese efforts to control the Mekong River. This support can be characterized as part of a broader effort of exchange whereby Cambodia has provided political support and natural resources to China in return for economic and military assistance. Cambodia's desire for economic assistance from the regional power appears to be the strongest incentive shaping its foreign policy. At the time of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's ascendancy, Cambodia was one of the world's poorest countries, its economy devastated by the Khmer Rouge and subsequent Vietnamese occupation. Hun Sen's pursuit of favorable trade arrangements, foreign investment, and developmental assistance has gradually improved Cambodia's economic situation but has also created a system of dependence upon foreign patronage that has created its own set of foreign policy challenges.

Data collected from 1995 until 2013 shows that China has been Cambodia's largest contributor of foreign direct investment (FDI), with a \$9.7 billion volume more than double the flows of the next highest country, while simultaneously providing more than \$2.89 billion in developmental assistance over the same period, far outpacing the next closest competitor.¹¹⁹ Despite Cambodian efforts to guard information concerning its foreign debts, the World Bank in concert with the International Monetary Fund determined that as recently as 2010 China held as much as 66 percent of Cambodia's total debt.¹²⁰ Strong economic ties between the two countries and enormous amounts of Cambodian debt owed to China has increased Cambodia's dependency upon China, further reducing its ability to make foreign policy decisions counter to Chinese interests.

To determine why Cambodia has responded to Chinese domination of their relationship as described in the preceding section, it is important to understand the

¹¹⁹ Um, "Cambodia in 2013," 113.

¹²⁰ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 63.

historical events that drove Cambodia to Chinese dependency. Following Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge and subsequent Vietnamese occupation, Cambodia's economy was left in shambles. Mass murder of the nation's professional class and forced population migrations onto communal farms resulted in more than 50 percent of Cambodia's population living under the poverty line by 1992.¹²¹ Following a 1997 coup by Hun Sen, international sanctions on Cambodia reversed what little economic improvement had begun since the reestablishment of Cambodian sovereignty in 1991. To combat this, Cambodia was left with few options better than the acceptance of economic assistance from donor nations such as China. As a result, Hun Sen "turned to China for financial aid to replace that temporarily suspended by Western donors."¹²² Since that time, Chinese aid has been particularly appealing to Hun Sen. In contrast to donations from the West, Chinese loans have come without conditions such as the eradication of corruption or protection of human rights, which are particularly irksome issues for Hun Sen's authoritarian rule. This has enabled Hun Sen to govern as he pleases but has also created dependency on foreign aid without incentive for political or economic reform.

Additionally, China's reputed 'no strings attached' loan policies toward Cambodia have facilitated the development of a unique form of dependency, characterized by Ear as "Dutch disease," that has hindered Cambodian efforts to reduce dependency on China. 'Dutch disease' is a term used, typically in the context of natural resources, to identify how large inflows of foreign capital can disrupt other economic sectors and cause dependency on the resource responsible for the monetary surplus.¹²³ This phenomenon is commonly associated with countries that are wholly dependent upon oil and gas for the majority of their gross domestic product. In particular, these countries demonstrate an inability to create alternative industries and once those commodities run out, struggle to maintain economic growth. In Cambodia, foreign aid has taken on this role. The amount of foreign aid provided to Cambodia, primarily through Chinese inputs,

¹²¹ United Nations Development Program, <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

¹²² Ian Storey, "China's Tightening Relationship with Cambodia," *China Brief* 6, no. 9 (April 2006): 5.

¹²³ Ear, "Political Economy," 75.

has increased dramatically in recent years. For example, from 1993 to 2003, Cambodia received approximately \$5 billion of foreign aid, roughly equivalent to 13 percent of its GDP; however, since 2007, foreign aid receipts have expanded to more than half of Cambodia's national budget.¹²⁴ This has created a dependency on foreign aid for Cambodia that has limited its ability to make its own decisions. As Ear also points out, this massive volume of aid has facilitated large scale corruption and enabled Cambodian elites to enrich themselves at the expense of the population. Lacking the ability to wean itself off of foreign aid, Cambodia has been forced to provide preferential treatment to China to maintain its income.

In conjunction with its prolific economic assistance, China has also provided Cambodia with the means to increase the size and capabilities of its armed forces and has exploited rifts that Cambodia's poor human rights record have created with the West. Having achieved good effects in its relationship with Cambodia from the provision of economic assistance, China followed suit by diversifying its spending to include more than US\$ 5 million in military assistance annually to the under-developed Cambodian armed forces.¹²⁵ These inroads have served to deepen ties between the two countries; and they have also provided Hun Sen much-needed options when his human rights record have created issues on the international stage.

In exchange for China's economic and military assistance, Cambodia has repeatedly provided political support on issues of importance to China. For example, the issue of Taiwanese sovereignty is arguably China's most important foreign policy issue. Following his coup in 1997, one of Hun Sen's first acts as Prime Minister was to close Taiwan's de facto embassy in Phnom Penh, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office.¹²⁶ At the time, this was undoubtedly an unexpected development following Hun Sen's prominent role as Prime Minister for the Vietnamese-supported People's Republic of Kampuchea and the time spent fighting the Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge. Despite strong ties to what had been a competitor to China, Hun Sen's willingness to move

¹²⁴ Ear, "Political Economy," 74; Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 79.

¹²⁵ Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 67.

¹²⁶ Storey, "China's Tightening Relationship," 5.

beyond old grievances and align Cambodia with Chinese political interests is regularly demonstrated by his support of the 'One China' policy.

Similarly, contemporary examples demonstrate Cambodia's willingness to support Chinese political issues in the face of intense opposition from regional partners. Along this theme, two examples are suggestive. First, Cambodia has consistently supported Chinese efforts to expand its control of the South China Sea. On multiple occasions, this zero sum political support has come at the expense of Cambodia's relations with its partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The tendency by many of Cambodia's partners to assume Cambodia would toe the ASEAN party line and support ASEAN initiatives was refuted in 2012, as Cambodia bucked typical ASEAN behavior while serving as ASEAN Chair by choosing not to intercede on behalf of its regional ASEAN partners with respect to the South China Sea, siding instead with China.¹²⁷ Claimant states hopeful for increased leverage in the dispute from a unified ASEAN have been repeatedly disappointed by Cambodia's refusal to change its position on China. Disregarding extensive ASEAN pressure to release a joint statement condemning aggressive Chinese actions in the South China Sea, Cambodia has steadfastly refused to defy its patron and has instead chosen strained relations with ASEAN members in spite of almost universal acceptance of China's culpability in the matter. In the face of overwhelming pressure to toe the line in Sino-ASEAN relations, Cambodia has refused to do so and has steadfastly supported Chinese efforts to dominate the South China Sea.

Additionally, the 2009 deportation of 20 persecuted Uyghur asylum seekers reinforces this argument and demonstrates the cause and effect relationship that Chinese patronage has on Cambodian political decision-making. For centuries the Uyghur from Xinjiang Province have sought independence and freedom from Chinese rule. Following renewed independence protests in July 2009 and at risk of prosecution by the Chinese government, 20 Uyghurs sought asylum in Cambodia. Despite intense international pressure from states and international organizations across the globe, Cambodia

¹²⁷ Leng Thearith, "Cambodia's Betwixt and between Foreign Policy," *East Asia Forum*, June 5, 2014, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/05/cambodias-betwixt-and-between-foreign-policy/>.

repatriated the asylum seekers back to China at China's request. Although neither Cambodia nor China admitted that the repatriation was facilitated by China's provision of significant economic benefits, the arrival of more than \$1.2 billion in aid from China immediately after the asylum seekers were returned presents compelling evidence that it did.¹²⁸

Furthermore, Cambodia's response to the Xayaburi Dam in Laos stands in sharp contrast with its actions toward China and presents additional compelling evidence that a quid pro quo does exist. Begun in 2012, the Laotian Xayaburi Dam is the first non-Chinese dam to be built on the main stem of the Mekong. Whereas the Cambodian response to Chinese dam building efforts has been largely supportive, Cambodia's has been decisive in its condemnation of Laos for its efforts to dam the Mekong. According to numerous news reports, Cambodia has lodged multiple complaints directly with the Laotian government, threatened to file suit over the issue with the International Court of Justice at The Hague, and attempted to halt Laotian dam building efforts through institutions such as the Mekong River Commission.¹²⁹ A key difference that helps explain why Cambodia has reacted differently in this case lies in the provision of economic assistance. Whereas China provides Cambodia with billions of dollars annually in economic assistance, aid, and investment, trade between Laos and Cambodia is tiny by comparison. With only \$10 million per year in trade flowing between the two countries, and virtually no economic assistance, the Cambodian government lacks the incentives necessary for it to overlook the Laotian dam.¹³⁰ Despite near identical environmental effects, Cambodia's negative response toward Laos makes the quid pro quo arrangement difficult to ignore.

¹²⁸ Thayer "China's Relations," 230; Reuters, "Cambodia Deports Uyghurs to China," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 20, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/a/Cambodia_Deports_Uyghurs_To_China/1908601.html.

¹²⁹ Zakariya Tin, "Cambodia Warns Laos over Mekong Dam," *Radio Free Asia*, last modified April 25, 2012, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/dam-04192012143244.html>; Radio Free Asia, "Laos Halts Xayaburi Dam Work," *Asia Times*, May 11, 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NE11Ae02.html.

¹³⁰ Rann Reuy, "Cambodia Eyes Laos Trade," *Phnom Penh Post*, April 22, 2013, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/cambodia-eyes-laos-trade>.

Finally, Cambodia's most recent general elections demonstrate that Chinese interests in Cambodia are not in danger of suddenly changing as was recently the case in Myanmar. The 2013 elections were Cambodia's most hotly contested since Hun Sen's coup of 1997. Exposing a critical lack of support for Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the once dominant CPP secured a meager 48% of the vote and only 68 of the 123 National Assembly seats.¹³¹ In contrast, their opponents, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) received more than 44% of the vote and won 55 seats in the National Assembly.¹³² These results indicate that despite CPP control for more than 30 years, the Cambodian people are ready for new leadership. Should Hun Sen receive a further dip in popularity the odds are good the CNRP will be successful in the next election in 2018. China has little to fear, however, from an upset by the CNRP. The CNRP's leader, Sam Rainsy, has repeatedly voiced his support for Chinese issues and disdain for Vietnam.¹³³ This support lends credence to the idea that a Rainsy controlled administration will continue Hun Sen's policy of political support for China in exchange for economic assistance.

D. CAMBODIA'S RESPONSE STRATEGY

For the reasons outlined in the preceding sections, I conclude that Cambodia has taken a strategy of appeasement with China. Despite being discounted by Mearsheimer as an ultimately ineffective strategy, appeasing countries aim to "modify the behavior of the aggressor by conceding it power in the hope that this gesture will make the aggressor feel more secure, thus dampening or eliminating its motive for aggression."¹³⁴ Acharya associates appeasement with the more common term of bandwagoning, stating that "bandwagoning implies acquiescence to a rising power by a state threatened by it

¹³¹ Thomas Fuller, "Ruling Party Wins Narrowly in Cambodian Vote," *New York Times*, July 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/29/world/asia/hun-sens-party-holds-on-to-win-cambodian-vote.html>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Murray Hiebert and Phuong Nguyen, "Cambodian Regime Realigns its Foreign Relations," *YaleGlobal Online*, February 4, 2014, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/challenged-home-cambodian-regime-realigns-its-foreign-relations>.

¹³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 139.

(appeasement).”¹³⁵ The patron-client relationship that has resulted from Cambodia’s strategy of appeasement has facilitated the efforts of Hun Sen’s regime to remain in power for more than twenty years, but has also created dependencies upon China that threaten Cambodia’s ability to make independent decisions absent Chinese influence. As Thayer points out, “Chinese financial assistance is critical not only for Cambodian economic development but also for the CPP’s legitimacy. Infrastructure projects, made possible largely by Chinese loans and grants, have earned the CPP credibility,” and have ultimately facilitated the CPP’s survival to the present day.¹³⁶ Lacking the ability to wean itself off of Chinese foreign aid, Cambodia has repeatedly provided preferential treatment to China, frequently at the expense of its relationships with neighboring countries and in apparent conflict with its own interests as its experiences on the Mekong River indicates.

Notwithstanding compelling evidence of Cambodia’s propensity to appease the regional power, its overall strategy in relation to China is not so simplistic as to be described by that model alone. On those rare occasions when Cambodian interests do not align with China, Cambodia uses multilateral institutions to counter Chinese efforts in an indirect manner. Institutions are a key component of Cambodia’s foreign policy toward China and enable it to express its interests without suffering the blowback direct confrontation can sometimes create. As typical of most Southeast Asian nations in their relations with China, institutions “help Asian states to mitigate intra-regional power asymmetries that would otherwise aggravate the security dilemma.”¹³⁷

Since the founding of the Mekong River Commission in 1995, members have used the institution as a medium to promote, “international cooperation, data collection, and environmental monitoring,” in an effort to ensure uniform protection of river interests among that institutions four member nations.¹³⁸ Of especial importance to these members of the MRC is the institution’s ability to affect Chinese activities on the river

¹³⁵ Amitav Acharya, “Will Asia’s Past Be Its Future?” *International Security* 28, no. 3 (2004): 151, doi: 10.1162/016228803773100101.

¹³⁶ Thayer, “China’s Relations,” 244.

¹³⁷ Acharya, “Will Asia’s Past,” 164.

¹³⁸ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 26.

through “collective bargaining, and/or by being able to use regional agreements to constrain the Chinese.”¹³⁹ A compelling example of Cambodia’s use of the institutional approach to influence Chinese activities occurred during the two most recent major Southeast Asian droughts. In 2010 and again in 2016, “China was confronted with unparalleled criticism of its dam building after record low water levels in the Mekong led to smaller fish catches, less water for irrigated agriculture, livestock, and drinking and suspended river transportation affecting trade and tourism.”¹⁴⁰ In response to the environmental disasters, blamed by most downstream states on the combined effects of drought, climate change, and Chinese dams withholding water to complete the filling of Lancang reservoirs, the MRC, “called for greater cooperation from China in managing the Mekong River.”¹⁴¹ These calls were heard by China, which released water following the requests and demonstrated a desire to be seen as a team player by its downstream neighbors. If an advocacy institution such as the MRC did not exist to provide additional weight to these issues, it is doubtful China would have responded as quickly to resolve the situation.

E. CONCLUSION

Despite the presence of clear economic and agricultural benefits that a healthy Mekong River has brought Cambodia for many centuries, the dependencies that have been created by Chinese patronage in the last twenty years have proven to be far more powerful an incentive driving its behavior. Since China’s economic opening in the late 1970s, the regional power has embarked on an aggressive campaign to win friends in the region and continue its fast-paced economic growth. A way it has accomplished this has been through the backing of smaller states like Cambodia, whose friendship has enabled China to exploit the country’s unique economic opportunities and also provides it with a political ally that will offer its unabashed support on China’s more controversial efforts in the region. Cambodia’s friendship has not come cheaply, as large Chinese investitures of

¹³⁹ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 38.

¹⁴⁰ Sebastian Biba, “China Drives Water Cooperation with Mekong Countries,” *Third Pole*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/2016/02/01/china-drives-water-cooperation-with-mekong-countries>.

¹⁴¹ Jennifer Rigby, “Dams, Drought and Disaster along the Mekong River,” *Integrated Regional Information Networks*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/10/dams-drought-and-disaster-along-mekong-river>; “Mekong River Commission Addresses Drought,” United Press International, April 7, 2010, <http://www.upi.com/Mekong-River-Commission-addresses-drought/39251270674047>.

foreign aid show. This strategy of quid pro quo whereby China provides Cambodia with economic assistance in exchange for political endorsement is a form of appeasement that demonstrates that, for the time being, Cambodia's political leadership is far more interested in short term economic gain over long-term productivity and environmental sustainability. The next chapter will show how in contrast, Vietnam has generally followed a mixed strategy of neorealist predicted balancing and institutional enmeshment that enables Vietnam to maintain a flexible foreign policy in the face of increased Chinese power and assertiveness.

IV. VIETNAMESE RESPONSE TO CHINESE HYDROPOWER DEVELOPMENT ON THE MEKONG



Figure 3. Mekong Delta¹⁴²

The previous chapter examined Cambodia's response to China's actions on the Mekong River. A comparative analysis is applied to Vietnam in this chapter. Like Cambodia, Vietnam is excessively dependent upon the river and stands to suffer mightily from Chinese upstream activities. However, key differences in the behavior of the two states are present, as exemplified by Vietnam's willingness to address sovereignty related issues with China through direct confrontation in place of Cambodia's patronage-seeking behavior. To understand how this relationship differs, this chapter examines the specific relationship between China and Vietnam and seeks to determine how Chinese control of the Mekong River influences Vietnam's relationship with the regional power. To do so,

¹⁴² Source: "Mekong Delta," digital image, Dutch Water Sector, 2012, <http://www.dutchwatersector.com/uploads/2012/01/dws-dhv-mekong-satellite550px.jpg>.

this chapter first describes the importance of the river to Vietnam's economic and agricultural development and defines how Chinese activities upstream have negatively impacted Vietnamese farmers and fishermen. Second, the specific Vietnamese response to Chinese control of the Mekong River is examined. Third, this chapter provides an analysis of those factors that have had the greatest impact on the current relationship between the two states. The chapter concludes by analyzing the different strategies Vietnam has employed to cope with the threat China's growing power has created and the destructive effects its efforts to control the Mekong River have caused.

Ultimately, this chapter shows that despite Vietnam's tendency to confront Chinese intrusion into other areas of its sovereignty, its response to Chinese actions on the Mekong have been modest in comparison. To protect its interests on the Mekong River, Vietnam has relied primarily upon institutions such as the Mekong River Commission to advance its interests. As a result, Vietnam has been largely unsuccessful in shaping Chinese behavior despite the existential threat Chinese activities upstream pose.

A. VIETNAM'S RIVER NEEDS

The rice and fishing industries dominate the economy of the fertile Mekong delta, in the southwestern region of Vietnam, and are an invaluable source of revenue and sustenance for the country overall. Approximately 76 percent of the delta's 20 million people are engaged in agricultural related work that is tied in some way to the river. Rice fields and aquaculture farms irrigated by the Mekong River and fish harvested from it supply 52 percent of Vietnam's total rice crop, and 60 percent of Vietnam's consumed protein respectively.¹⁴³ Rice production has become the region's most valuable commodity. With more than 4.4 million irrigated acres producing "16 million tons of rice annually for domestic consumption and export," rice grown in the Mekong delta accounts

¹⁴³ So Nam et al., "Lower Mekong Fisheries Estimated to Be worth around \$17 Billion a Year," *Catch and Culture* 21, no. 3 (2015): 5; Toru Konishi, "Climate Change on the Vietnam, Mekong Delta: Expected Impacts and Adaptations," World Bank, May 2011, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/rome2007initiative/FAO_WB_TCIO_CC_Meeting_May_2011/TORUKO_1.PDF.

for approximately “90 percent of Vietnam’s exported rice,” a sum equivalent to four percent of its annual gross domestic product.¹⁴⁴

As the human population in the region continues to grow at unprecedented rates and competition over sources of food increases, Vietnam will become more reliant upon this prime rice-producing area. Figures from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations project that “demand for agricultural products from the basin will increase from 20 to 50 percent over the next 30 years.”¹⁴⁵ As a result, the delta’s ability to maintain or increase current production levels will become critically important as Vietnam simultaneously meets domestic demand while continuing to export large quantities of rice throughout the globe. Long the major food stuff of the region, the wet rice Vietnam produces in such large quantities, “yields the highest caloric output per area of land of any grain,” adding to the delta’s value as a rice producing area.¹⁴⁶

Fish caught from the river and harvested from aquaculture farms provide another invaluable source of revenue and sustenance for the region. Beyond the immense role fish play in serving as a source of food for delta inhabitants, wild caught fish from the Mekong provide approximately \$760 million annually to the Vietnamese GDP.¹⁴⁷ However, since the 1990s, wild caught fish sales have been eclipsed by a rapidly growing Vietnamese aquaculture industry. The Mekong Delta’s flat terrain and proximity to the river make it particularly well suited for this aquaculture boom and is a key reason why Vietnam now ranks fourth in the world in global aquaculture production.¹⁴⁸ The delta’s contribution to this global ranking is significant. Of the approximate 2.5 million tons produced by Vietnam annually, the delta provides 1.6 million tons, a sum equaling

¹⁴⁴ FAO, “Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia,” 7; Tom Kompas et al., “The Effects of Rice Export Policy on Regional Income, Prices and the Poor: A Bottom-Up Regional CGE Model for Vietnam,” Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2010, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/619361468329677689/pdf/642450WP0P10760port0Apr10120Kompas.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ FAO, “Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia,” 7.

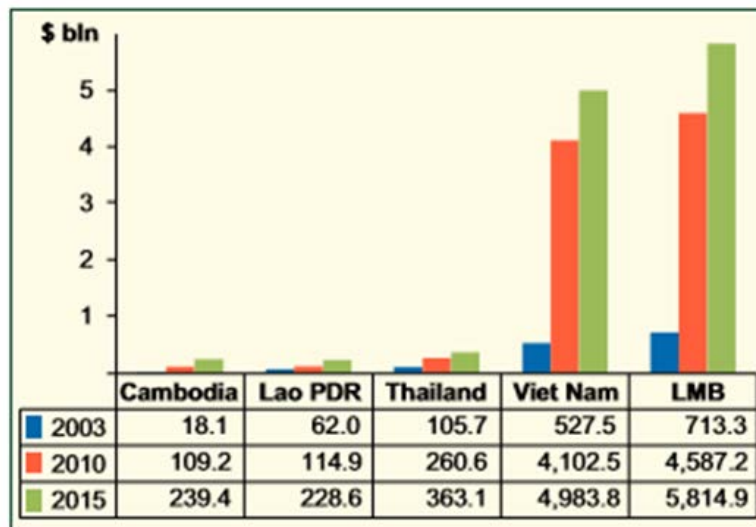
¹⁴⁶ Norman G. Owen, “Introduction: Places and Peoples,” in *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, ed. Norman G. Owen (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 7.

¹⁴⁷ Nam et al., “Lower Mekong Fisheries,” 4.

¹⁴⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Global Aquaculture Production Statistics Database Updated to 2013 – Summary Information,” 2015, 7, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4899e.pdf>.

roughly 64 percent of the national total.¹⁴⁹ As shown in Table 2, this relatively new industry to the delta has grown rapidly, with industry production increasing from \$500 million in 2003 to more than \$5 billion by 2015, a 12-fold increase in little over a decade that contributes approximately three percent of Vietnam’s GDP and 12 percent of its total exports.¹⁵⁰

Table 2. Aquaculture Estimated Value in the Mekong Basin¹⁵¹



Two factors have shaped the delta into the agricultural juggernaut it is today. First, access to irrigation from the Mekong River provides the water necessary to support three and often as many as four rice crops per year.¹⁵² Vietnamese improvements in irrigation techniques that more effectively capture available river water have enabled

¹⁴⁹ “Fisheries,” Mekong River Commission, 2015, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/topics/fisheries>; Sarah Mikesell, “Vietnam’s Aquaculture Success Boosts Economy,” *The Fish Site*, April 12, 2012, <http://www.thefishsite.com/fishnews/16913/vietnams-aquaculture-success-boosts-economy>.

¹⁵⁰ Milen Dyoulgenov, Ana Bucher, and Fernandia Zermoglio, “Climate Risk and Adaptation Country Profile: Vietnam,” Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, April 2011, 10, http://sdwebx.worldbank.org/climateportalb/doc/GFDRRCountryProfiles/wb_gfdr climate_change_country_profile_for_VNM.pdf; Nam et al., “Lower Mekong Fisheries,” 4, 5.

¹⁵¹ Source: Nam et al., “Lower Mekong Fisheries,” 4.

¹⁵² Jane Perlez, “Drought and ‘Rice First’ Policy Imperil Vietnamese Farmers,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/world/asia/drought-and-rice-first-policy-imperil-vietnamese-farmers.html>.

Vietnam to become the world's third largest exporter of rice despite ranking 68th in total land area.¹⁵³ To satisfy the massive demands created by water intensive rice and aquaculture farms, Vietnam withdraws approximately 52 percent of the estimated 62 cubic kilometers in volume that Mekong states withdraw annually.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, sedimentation has created the rich soils that facilitate rice growth. Over many millennia, eroded soil from the upper reaches of the Lancang River in China washed downstream and deposited "approximately 160 million tons of sediment each year into the South China Sea."¹⁵⁵ The rich topsoil this sedimentation creates currently extends as deep as 65 feet in most places, creating one of the most fertile regions in the world and equivalent to the Nile or Mississippi River deltas in fertility.¹⁵⁶

Chinese dams on the Lancang River threaten Vietnamese economic and agricultural interests in the delta in four ways. First, as the last country in line before the Mekong enters the South China Sea, Vietnam is especially susceptible to the effects of pollution that have plagued so many of China's rivers that lie downstream from its reservoirs.¹⁵⁷ Their intensive water use has created a significant vulnerability for delta farmers. Lacking the ability to treat this water for pollutants or salt, Vietnamese farmers are forced to use it as is, leaving them susceptible to pollutants and saltwater intrusion that are associated with Chinese dams upstream. Like other Mekong basin states, Vietnam depends upon heavy, wet season flows to wash pollutants out of the river system. Unlike other basin states, these pollutants tend to congregate most heavily in the delta when Chinese dam regulation does not precisely mimic natural flood conditions. As noted in a Mekong River Commission study,

¹⁵³ "Agriculture and Irrigation," Mekong River Commission, 2015, <http://mrcmekong.mrcdev.info/topics/agriculture-and-irrigation>; "Milled Rice Exports by Country in 1000 MT – Country Rankings," Index Mundi, last modified 2017, <http://www.indexmundi.com/agriculture/?commodity=milled-rice&graph=exports>.

¹⁵⁴ FAO, "Irrigation in Southern and Eastern Asia," x.

¹⁵⁵ Zuo Xue et al., "Late Holocene Evolution of the Mekong Subaqueous Delta, Southern Vietnam," *Marine Geology* 269, no. 1–2 (February 2010): 47, <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~zxue/Late%20Holocene%20Evolution%20of%20the%20Mekong%20Subaqueous%20Delta.pdf>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 275.

Changes to the Mekong flows such as through the building of reservoirs for hydropower generation could result in a number of problems such as a major impact on the flooding / drying cycle with consequent increase in acidity and aluminum toxicity, and on the ingress of saline water from the South China Sea.¹⁵⁸

The MRC study went on to conclude that industrial and municipal waste water from Vientiane and Phnom Penh are directly related to eutrophication, a process whereby water oxygen levels decline due to increased water richness from chemical runoff.¹⁵⁹ This pollution is an important cause of fish mortality. Without careful Chinese river regulation to mimic natural wet and dry season flow rates, Vietnam's fertile delta could soon become like those of the Yellow or Yangtze, two rivers containing massive hydroelectric stations that have been polluted to the point they can barely support life.¹⁶⁰ As a consequence of its downstream location, Vietnam has little choice but to hope China will be a better steward of the Mekong than it has its other major rivers.

Second, Chinese regulation of the Lancang Cascade allows sea water from the South China Sea to move farther upriver than normal, devastating irrigated rice and aquaculture fields. Typically, brackish water that flows upriver is pushed back and diluted as the Mekong empties itself of its monsoonal floodwaters. As has been described in previous chapters, Chinese dams restrict this natural flooding mechanism through regulation and leave the lower Mekong susceptible to salt water intrusion from the South China Sea, a problem magnified during periods of drought. This intrusion leaves delta farmers using saltier than normal water for irrigation with disastrous effects on their rice fields.¹⁶¹ In particular, the droughts of 2010 and 2016 were especially debilitating because reduced river flows from the dry weather, combined with Chinese impoundment of the river at the Lancang Cascade, enabled brackish water from the South China Sea to intrude farther upstream than any previous time and prevented normal freshwater

¹⁵⁸ Barry T. Hart, Michael J. Jones, and Gabrielle Pistone, "Transboundary Water Quality Issues in the Mekong River Basin," Mekong River Commission, 2001, 50, <http://m.mekonginfo.org/assets/midocs/0003423-environment-transboundary-water-quality-issues-in-the-lower-mekong-basin.pdf>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶⁰ Cronin, "Mekong Dams," 153.

¹⁶¹ Perlez, "Drought and 'Rice First.'"

flushing mechanisms from counteracting the ocean's effects. In particular, during the 2016 drought, all 13 Vietnamese provinces that make up the Mekong Delta suffered from saltwater intrusion, wiping out rice crops as farmers attempted to irrigate drought-stricken fields with saltier than normal river water.¹⁶² As Vietnamese authorities described, "in a rare concession to Vietnam, [at the height of the drought] the Chinese released water from dams in Yunnan Province in March, but the flow was too small to make a difference to the failing rice crop."¹⁶³ As a result, the Vietnamese lost approximately 393,000 acres of delta rice with another 1.24 million acres severely damaged in addition to uncounted numbers of dried up fish and shrimp ponds.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, these problems are expected to increase. Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment has projected that even during years of sufficient rain, "around 45 percent of the Mekong Delta will be negatively affected by saltwater intrusion by 2030."¹⁶⁵

Depopulation, relatedly, constitutes the third negative impact of Chinese regulation of the Lancang Cascade. As crops fail, farmers unable to financially recover from the drought's effects have migrated out of the delta, leaving "many villages with only half their populations."¹⁶⁶ Studies of the region demonstrate the effects that changes to the river have had. For example, "from 1984 to 1989, 92,893 people moved from [the] Mekong Delta region to other provinces. These numbers increased to 544,909 in the 2009–2014 period, while only 97,438 people moved to the delta from 2009 to 2014."¹⁶⁷ The percentages these figures represent are not available, but the five-fold increase in migration from the delta is indicative of the problems facing the delta. This population shift and probability of future agricultural disasters combined with a demonstrated

¹⁶² Perlez, "Drought and 'Rice First.'"

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Elena Holodny, "Vietnam Is Being Crippled by Its Worst Drought in Nearly a Century," *Business Insider*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/vietnam-drought-economic-slowdown-2016-4>.

¹⁶⁵ Viet Anh, "Chinese Dams a Threat to Lower Mekong River," *VnExpress International*, August 21, 2016, <http://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/chinese-dams-a-threat-to-lower-mekong-river-3456038.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Perlez, "Drought and 'Rice First.'"

¹⁶⁷ "Migration Crisis Looms over Mekong Delta," *VietnamNet Bridge*, October 31, 2016, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/166103/migration-crisis-looms-over-mekong-delta.html>.

Chinese inability to adequately meet downstream water requirements provides a much bleaker outlook for the region than Vietnamese officials are accustomed to admit.

Finally, the majority of sedimentation that is so important to replenishing the delta soils remains impounded behind the dams of the Lancang Cascade. Prior to the development of the Lancang cascade, approximately half of the river's sediment originated in the Tibetan Plateau and washed down the Mekong and onto farmers' fields.¹⁶⁸ This sedimentation created a natural and highly fertile source of soil replenishment that farmers up and down the Mekong have relied upon for millennia. Absent this normal form of replenishment for their fields, field fertility will diminish and the ability of the region to maintain current levels of production will likely be jeopardized. According to Mr. Nguyen Huu Thien of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, a global force in conservation efforts, "the continued lack of sediment[ation] will eventually kill the delta, leaving it a wasteland in the next 100 years or so."¹⁶⁹

B. VIETNAM'S RESPONSE TO CHINESE CONTROL OF THE MEKONG

In contrast to Vietnam's willingness to confront Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, Vietnam's response toward Chinese activities on the Mekong has been mild in comparison. In particular, two behaviors by Vietnam to specifically address Chinese hydropower development on the Mekong have been identified. First, Vietnam has joined several Mekong specific multilateral institutions it hopes will enable it to "enmesh China in a web of cooperative relations" believing this strategy will provide it more leverage than exists bilaterally.¹⁷⁰ These multilateral institutions often have the added benefit of leveling the regional playing field by overcoming Chinese advantages in geography and power through collective action on the part of China's downstream and less influential riparian neighbors. Though limited in its ability to resolve or mediate conflict, the MRC has long been the most important platform for lower Mekong states to address

¹⁶⁸ Goh, "China in the Mekong," 5.

¹⁶⁹ Perlez, "Drought and 'Rice First.'"

¹⁷⁰ Thayer, "Tyranny of Geography," 352.

transboundary water issues. Despite Chinese reluctance to join the institution, Vietnam has continued to use the MRC as its primary mechanism to shape Chinese behavior on the river. Further demonstrating its commitment to the institutional approach toward Mekong-related issues, Vietnam has jumped at any opportunity to engage China multilaterally. For example, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (LMCM) is a Chinese initiated multilateral organization that Vietnam joined in 2014 to ensure its voice is heard in all Mekong related dialogue.¹⁷¹

Second, Vietnam has taken advantage of support from the West to lend additional weight to its river initiatives.¹⁷² As part of the U.S. pivot east under the Obama administration, Vietnam and other lower Mekong states used the 2012 visit by U.S. Secretary of State Clinton's visit to draw attention to Mekong River issues. In return, Secretary Clinton responded by admonishing all Mekong states to increase cooperation and cautioned against the effects of further unilateral decision-making.¹⁷³

C. ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Though the institutional approach is useful to understand Sino-Vietnamese relations on the Mekong River, the overall tenor of the relationship is defined more broadly by additional factors. To fully assess why Vietnam has responded to Chinese efforts on the Mekong in the way that it has, three factors responsible for influencing Vietnam's current relationship with China must be understood. First, the two states share a common history in which China has frequently acted as an expansion-minded aggressor, reinforcing Vietnamese suspicion of Chinese activities in the present day. Second, domestic politics within the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) matter greatly. Since the end of the Cold War and normalization of relations with China, Vietnam's foreign policy and political leaders have generally split into two camps. Pro-Chinese conservatives have sought to maintain strong ties with China along ideological lines

¹⁷¹ Biba, "China Drives Water."

¹⁷² "US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Historic Laos Visit," BBC News, July 11, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18792282>.

¹⁷³ "Lower Mekong Initiative," U.S. Department of State, n.d., <https://www.state.gov/p/eap/mekong/index.htm>.

while reformists have tended to push for economic liberalization and state-wide modernization, often at the expense of the country's relationship with China. Finally, the increasingly interdependent economic relationship between the two states has created an enormous trade deficit for Vietnam that has left it susceptible to Chinese economic pressure.

First, the Vietnamese have been particularly geared toward suspicion of Chinese motives by their longstanding historical relationship with the Chinese. For more than 3,000 years, China has been the most influential external force driving Vietnamese actions.¹⁷⁴ The early stages of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship were marked by repeated Chinese efforts to conquer the productive Red River valley where Vietnamese identity first developed. Chinese annexation of Vietnam in 111 B.C. was followed by more than a millennia of intermittent rebellion as Vietnam struggled to regain its independence. Eventually successful in 939 A.D., Vietnam eventually found security through subservience. In acknowledging China's superiority and through the payment of annual tribute, Vietnam assured China of its benign intentions and found a peaceful way of maintaining its sovereignty without the warfare that marked its earlier relationship.¹⁷⁵

Despite their significant differences, events in the 20th century established bonds between the two states that endure to the present day. Of greatest importance during this period was the adoption of communism by both countries. China's size and earlier adoption of communism made it the natural model for Vietnam to emulate, yet Chinese support during the Vietnam War created cracks in the relationship that shared interests in communism could not overcome.¹⁷⁶ The withdrawal of American troops in 1972 meant Vietnam no longer required Chinese aid and could afford to dispense with the deferential role that marked the relationship for the previous 30 years. Suppressed issues such as differing border claims and Vietnam's budding relationship with Russia came to a head after Vietnam invaded the unstable and CCP-supported Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (then

¹⁷⁴ Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 61.

¹⁷⁵ David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (spring 2003): 67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137604>; Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 129.

¹⁷⁶ Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 176.

Kampuchea) in late 1978.¹⁷⁷ These issues continued to expand the ever-widening rift between the two countries and eventually led to outright, though inconclusive, conflict during the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979.

The Paris Peace Accords of 1991 ended Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and set conditions for the normalization of relations between China and Vietnam that occurred later the same year. Mindful of the peril of over-reliance upon China and still suspicious of Chinese motives, Vietnam sought to broaden its range of partners and strike a “balanced position between the great powers” while becoming an influential member of the Southeast Asian regional community.¹⁷⁸ Over the last 25 years this inclination towards suspicion stood at odds with the ideological commonalities that have facilitated continued cooperation between the two states.

Second, since normalization in 1991, Vietnamese relations with China have been shaped largely by the political camp that holds power within the Vietnamese Communist Party (formerly the Vietnam Workers’ Party). Two groups in particular have held control over the past twenty-five years. Conservative elements have tended to focus on initiatives that facilitate regime stability and, as the last remaining major communist power, China remains the most important model for VCP leaders.¹⁷⁹ After the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, VCP conservatives identified the West’s efforts to eliminate Communism as the VCP’s most pressing threat to the regime’s survival.¹⁸⁰ To resist this perceived assault, powerful VCP conservatives aligned Vietnamese interests more closely with those of China, believing as they had during Vietnam’s independence movement that survival depended once again upon maintaining close ties with the regional power.¹⁸¹ Under conservative rule, Vietnamese relations with China tended to take on a

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 186–96.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander L. Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam’s China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways,” *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 813, doi: 10.1525/as.2006.46.6.805.pdf.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander L. Vuving, “Vietnam: A Tale of Four Players,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2010): 369, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41418575>.

¹⁸⁰ Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution,” 812.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 820.

more deferential role as Vietnamese leadership sought ideological solidarity with the regional power against imperialist western states.¹⁸²

In recent years, the conservatives have lost traction as Chinese expansion has increased in the South China Sea and modernization and economic growth have become obvious paths to increased prosperity and influence within the region. In general, modernization efforts have been driven by pro-West reformists who have determined that “national interests—as opposed to ideological considerations—set foreign policy.”¹⁸³ This change is widely believed to have begun as early as 2003 when the VCP Central Committee announced its “Strategy of Fatherland Defense in a New Situation” which set new standards to determine Vietnam’s friends and enemies.¹⁸⁴ From that point forward, the resolution stated, Vietnam would judge foreign states, “according to their attitude toward Vietnam’s goals—not their ideological affiliation.”¹⁸⁵

Recent Vietnamese support for the floundering Trans Pacific Partnership bears witness to the growing influence of reformers within the party. Despite Chinese exclusion and condemnation of the program, requirements for greater transparency of Vietnam’s state-owned enterprises, and clauses directing protection of human rights and labor unions, Vietnam wholeheartedly pursued admission into the multilateral free trade agreement, whose negotiations were often dominated by the Obama Administration’s position. This positioning for admission is a move that was unthinkable as little as a decade earlier.¹⁸⁶ The increased influence the reformists have had within the VCP foreshadows further Vietnamese movement toward liberalization, modernization, and alignment with the West on specific issues.

Third, the highly interdependent nature of Vietnam’s economic relationship with China has significantly impacted its foreign relations calculus with the larger power.

¹⁸² Ibid., 821.

¹⁸³ Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution,” 821.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ankit Panda, “Trans-Pacific Partnership: Do It for Vietnam,” *Diplomat*, April 28, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/trans-pacific-partnership-do-it-for-vietnam/>.

Since normalization, Vietnam has developed close economic ties and an enormous trade surplus with China. As a product of the two states' comparative advantages, Vietnam exports primarily raw materials such as coal, oil, and rubber to China in exchange for cheap, manufactured goods.¹⁸⁷ This unequal trade relationship has created a massive trade imbalance that shows little sign of correction. For example, over a period of one decade, from 2002 to 2012, China's trade surplus with Vietnam grew eight-fold, and has continued to grow since.¹⁸⁸ The trade surplus is a contentious issue between the two countries, but not one Vietnam will resolve without drastic reform.¹⁸⁹ Since China liberalized its economy earlier than did Vietnam, China was already well on the road to developing a powerful industrial base when relations between the two countries were normalized. As a result, Vietnamese efforts to out-compete Chinese products have largely failed. Importantly, due to this trade surplus, Vietnamese dependence upon Chinese goods, and dependence upon Chinese investment to fund its larger projects, China has been able to exert an increased amount of pressure upon Vietnam, creating a common conception that China could, "wreck the Vietnamese economy if [it] wanted."¹⁹⁰

D. VIETNAM'S RESPONSE STRATEGY

As a product of the above issues, Vietnam has hedged its bets in responding to China's actions, pursuing a two-part strategy that seeks to "internally balance" against Chinese attempts to dominate the region while simultaneously binding itself to China through regional institutions. Described as a strategy of "cooperation and struggle" by Thayer or "deference and defiance" by Hiep, Vietnam has sought to disrupt Chinese expansion into Vietnamese territory by strengthening its ability to defend itself.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Jeff Rutherford, Kate Lazarus, and Shawn Kelley, "Rethinking Investments in Natural Resources: China's Emerging Role in the Mekong Region," International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2008, 27–29, http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/trade_china_study.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Thayer, "Tyranny of Geography," 353.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Stirring up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses," *Asia Report*, no. 229 (July 24, 2012): 3.

¹⁹¹ Thayer, "Tyranny of Geography," 348; Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 35, no. 3 (December 2013): 334, doi: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/531071>.

Likewise, Chinese asymmetric advantages in size, power, and resources have made military confrontation a disastrous prospect for Vietnam. To avoid military confrontation and a war it cannot hope to win, Vietnam uses institutions to counter Chinese power advantages and achieve its national interests.

In contrast to Cambodia's strategy of appeasement described in the previous chapter, Vietnam's response is in many ways predictable for neorealist scholars. Neorealists such as Waltz or Mearsheimer, acknowledging the anarchic nature of the international system, would anticipate Vietnam's efforts to reform its economy and modernize its military as a natural response necessary to increase its potential and relative power.¹⁹² The fundamental tenets of neorealism include the ideas that "survival is the most important goal of states, that these states can never be certain about other states' intentions, and that the international order is anarchic."¹⁹³ From this perspective, Vietnam should be seen as relying upon itself for survival—as it has done for several millennia.

Layered on top of those systemic principles, the shared history of conflict between the two states that has lasted on and off for the past three thousand years has had an impact on Vietnam's behavior. These repeated violent conflicts, lasting until Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1991, have reinforced within Vietnam the existential necessity of "developing its own self-sufficient military capacity to deter China from using force."¹⁹⁴ Repeated periods of hostility between these two nations have contributed to Vietnam's pursuit of a stronger, more modern military to deter future conflict with China and includes the purchase of advanced Kilo class submarines from Russia and advanced weapons systems from the United States, while Vietnam simultaneously opens its ports to foreign navies of all types to encourage their presence in the South China Sea.¹⁹⁵ Other examples also expose Vietnam's growing concern over Chinese assertiveness. As Mearsheimer has predicted, "China's neighbors are certain to fear its

¹⁹² Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power*, 43.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

¹⁹⁴ Thayer, "Tyranny of Geography," 348.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

rise.”¹⁹⁶ In the case of Vietnam, the more aggressive China becomes, the more emphasis Vietnam appears to place upon the acquisition of modern weapons systems to counter the growing threat China is perceived to present.

Neorealism further serves as a useful template for understanding the role played by the increasingly influential reformists within the VCP. According to Vuving, “the integrationists try to counterbalance Vietnam’s close ties with China by strengthening relations with America.”¹⁹⁷ Notably, these reformists are “eager to conclude a comprehensive trade pact, which would facilitate Vietnam’s integration into the world economy and shift its position between China and America closer to Washington.”¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, these reformists appear to be taking a harder line against Chinese operations on the Mekong River than their conservative predecessors. Though Vietnamese officials have been historically tight-lipped on Mekong issues, a public remark by former President Truong Tan Sang spoken before he left office in 2016 is particularly telling. Providing a stern warning to China a day after China’s largest dam on the Lancang Cascade came online that “tensions over water resources are not only threatening economic growth but present a source of conflict,” due to their adverse impact on downstream states, President Sang made clear his frustration with China’s unilateral river action.¹⁹⁹

Though neorealism serves as a useful indicator of Vietnamese actions toward China in general, little evidence of this response is found when observing Vietnamese actions toward Chinese activities on the Mekong River. To address this threat, Vietnam appears to prefer an institution-based approach to achieve its objectives. Explaining such an approach, Ravenhill states, “smaller powers will seek regional arrangements... in the hope that a regional institution will enable them to constrain a hegemon’s freedom of

¹⁹⁶ Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” 162.

¹⁹⁷ Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution,” 816.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Parameswaran Ponnudurai, “Water Wars Feared over Mekong,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 30, 2012, <http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/east-asia-beat/mekong-09302012160353.html>.

action.”²⁰⁰ To this end, Vietnamese efforts to constrain China’s freedom of action focus on “promot[ing] multilateral efforts to enmesh China in a web of cooperative relations,” such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asia Summit.²⁰¹ By using these groups to internationalize key issues and challenge Chinese aggression, Vietnam magnifies its authority on key disagreements with China it would have difficulty doing otherwise. Furthermore, these institutions enable Vietnam to “improve its position vis-à-vis Beijing, through collective bargaining, and by being able to use regional agreements and norms to constrain the Chinese.”²⁰²

Though Vietnam has shown its preference for using international and regional institutions to influence Chinese actions, it has had only limited success in doing so on issues specific to the Mekong River. Much like Cambodia, Vietnam has attempted to use the MRC to affect Chinese and partner nation activities on the Mekong River. Since its inception, the MRC has been the only institution specifically designated to “promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of [Mekong River] water and related resources for the countries’ mutual benefit and the people’s well-being.”²⁰³ To this end, the MRC has proven a useful tool to Vietnam in shaping Chinese behavior on certain issues. Two specific examples are indicative of the MRC’s ability to create change.

First, the brutal 2016 drought caused massive damage to the Vietnamese farming and fishing industries in the delta. As a result of the institutional leverage provided by the MRC, China released more than 12.65 cubic kilometers of water from its Jinhong

²⁰⁰ John Ravenhill, “A Three Bloc World: The New East Asian Regionalism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2, no. 2, (August 2002): 169, doi: 10.1093/irap/2.2.167.

²⁰¹ Thayer, “Tyranny of Geography,” 352.

²⁰² Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 38.

²⁰³ “Vision and Mission,” Mekong River Commission, n.d., <http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-mrc/vision-and-mission>.

Reservoir from March to May of 2016.²⁰⁴ This act, which the MRC described as, “an unprecedented ‘water diplomacy’ mission to alleviate the ongoing drought in Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam,” did little to relieve Vietnam’s agricultural woes, but did successfully perpetuate the idea of China as benevolent water provider.²⁰⁵ In a letter released by the Vietnamese Secretariat of the MRC, Dr. Pham Tuan Phan indicates the positive effect this action generated, acknowledging that the MRC Secretariat, “views this decision (emergency water supply) as a kind and considerate gesture exhibited by a good neighbor and friend to the Mekong countries.”²⁰⁶

Additionally, Vietnam has used the increased leverage the MRC provides to increase Chinese transparency on Mekong River matters. Since the inception of China’s damming activities, Chinese officials have been reluctant to provide any information on its activities, leaving its downstream neighbors in the dark. On several occasions over the last decade, China has released water penned up behind its massive cascades without providing advanced warning to MRC members, often with tragic consequences. After years of negotiations, the MRC eventually convinced China to provide water release information. This data “enabled the MRC member countries in the Lower Mekong to strengthen their river water-level monitoring and improve the accuracy of flood forecasting as well as mitigate the negative effects of flooding.”²⁰⁷ Long term, these concessions will enable downstream states like Vietnam to better protect their populace and facilitate the provision of scientific analysis as it relates to drought and flood cycles.

²⁰⁴ Paradis Someth et al., *Joint Observation and Evaluation of the Emergency Water Supplement from China to the Mekong River* (Vientiane, Laos: Mekong River Commission and Ministry of Water Resources of the People’s Republic of China, 2016), ii, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Final-Report-of-JOE.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ “China’s Release of Water from Jinghong Dam Brings Relief to Mekong River Commission,” *Chiangrai Times*, March 19, 2016, <http://www.chiangraitimes.com/chinas-release-of-water-from-jinghong-dam-brings-relief-to-mekong-river-commission.html>.

²⁰⁶ Fuqiang Tian and Hui Liu, “‘China’s Water Hegemony in Asia’ or ‘Shared Rivers, Shared Futures’: Which?” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand, July 27, 2016, <http://th.china-embassy.org/eng/ztbd/t1384905.htm>.

²⁰⁷ “Mekong River Commission and China Boost Water Data Exchange,” Mekong River Commission, August 30, 2013, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/mekong-river-commission-and-china-boost-water-data-exchange/>.

Vietnam has been quick to demonstrate its appreciation for China's cooperative efforts by deepening its engagement with China. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation initiative (LMC) is one example of this increased cooperation. As an institution, the LMC was founded in 2015 and is China's attempt to compete with both the MRC and the U.S. initiated Greater Mekong Subregion. Though few benefits to membership are easily discernible, it is assessed that Vietnam joined this particular institution with the sole purpose of encouraging continued Chinese transparency and cooperation.

Though these MRC-led initiatives are important, it has been hamstrung by "the absence of China and member states' domestic development agendas that leave little space for consideration of downstream effects."²⁰⁸ An important example that demonstrates the institution's weakness is Laos' pursuit of dam development on the river's main stem despite strong protests from Cambodia and Vietnam. Lacking individual veto power over upstream projects and the ability to enforce MRC resolutions, neither Cambodia nor Vietnam were able to prevent unilateral Laotian action. Further, Chinese refusals to join the MRC have inhibited the institutions ability to curtail Chinese action. Nevertheless, because of its collective approach and its agenda's international acceptance, the MRC remains Vietnam's best chance to influence the regional power's actions.

Acknowledging these inherent weaknesses within the MRC, Vietnam has pushed for increased institutionalism, calling for improved cooperation between ASEAN and the MRC and inclusion of MRC specific issues within the agendas of other, more prominent regional institutions.²⁰⁹ These sentiments are echoed by others in the region. Citing the enormous impact that changes in Mekong rice production will have on the region's ability to feed its inhabitants, groups within Southeast Asia outside of the Mekong Basin

²⁰⁸ Oliver Hensengerth, "Transboundary River Cooperation and the Regional Public Good: The Case of the Mekong River," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (August 2009): 343, doi: 10.1355/cs31-2f.

²⁰⁹ Hau Hin, "ASEAN, MRC to Boost Cooperation on Mekong Issues," Mekong River Commission, April 4, 2010, <http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/asean-mrc-to-boost-cooperation-on-mekong-issues>.

continue to call for measures to enhance water security and include water security matters within broader institutional discussions.²¹⁰

E. CONCLUSION

The Mekong River provides Vietnam with a number of crucial benefits, none more important than the lucrative rice, fishing, and aquaculture industries that depend upon normal river flows to maintain high production levels the Vietnamese have come to depend upon. Chinese activities at the Lancang Cascade threaten these industries, harming Vietnam's ability to feed its own populace and export large quantities of much-needed food to other parts of Southeast Asia. To understand why Vietnam has responded as it has, two schools of thought prove useful. Supporting the neorealist viewpoint, several millennia of Chinese aggression combined with growing anti-Chinese Vietnamese nationalism act as key drivers of Vietnamese efforts to balance against the regional power. These efforts at balancing have led Vietnam to focus on improving its economy and increase its military capabilities to deter Chinese aggression. However, deterrence is not Vietnam's only approach. Due to the enormous trade imbalance between the two countries that strongly favors China, Vietnam requires a less confrontational approach to maintain good relations. Institutions enable this less confrontational approach and provide Vietnam with the ability to diplomatically "punch above its weight," through the collective approach institutions facilitate. Currently, the institutional approach has proved to be the method preferred by Vietnam to address Chinese activities at the Lancang Cascade. As the recent 2016 drought demonstrated, Chinese behavior can be modified to an extent, but this institutional tack may not prove to be the correct approach in the long run. Chinese refusal to join the MRC and that institution's inability to shape Chinese behavior may soon cause Vietnam to pursue alternative strategies to protect the delta's most valuable resource.

²¹⁰ A. Ibrahim Almuttaqi, "Why ASEAN Must Pay More Attention to the Mekong Delta," *Jakarta Post*, June 10, 2016, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2016/06/10/why-asean-must-pay-more-attention-to-the-mekong-delta.html>.

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V. CONCLUSION

Competition over water resources is a major source of global instability as human populations outpace supplies of fresh water. The issue is further complicated by the transnational nature of much of the world's freshwater supplies. Lacking any authoritative international body dedicated to resolving water issues, violence is increasingly becoming the deciding factor in interstate competition. In these cases, the more powerful state, particularly when located upstream, is often the final arbiter in determining how to use these water resources. At the center of these issues lies Southeast Asia, a region where "water security is set to become the regions' defining crisis by midcentury."²¹¹

China's recent construction of the Lancang Cascade has created a significant dilemma for downstream states. China's far greater size, power, and strategic possession of the headwaters of the Mekong River has enabled it to unilaterally develop the river for its own purposes, giving China a powerful strategic advantage over its downstream neighbors. By controlling the glacial headwaters of the Mekong in the Tibetan Plateau, China controls up to 70 percent of the river's dry season water supply.²¹² China's ability to harness and restrict this water presents a powerful incentive for downstream states to comply with Chinese initiatives while providing China with an incredible bargaining tool in shaping its foreign relations. Chinese control of the Mekong and resulting degradation from these dams have set conditions for a perfect storm of water-related conflict and provide a unique opportunity to understand how states respond to threats to their water security, particularly when that threat comes from one of the most powerful countries in the world.

This thesis set out to answer the following research question: What factors explain the different strategies Cambodia and Vietnam have employed in their relations with China to maintain traditional access to the Mekong River. The thesis found that the quid

²¹¹ Chellaney, *Water*, 1.

²¹² Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests," 624.

pro quo exchange of economic assistance from China for Cambodian political support has facilitated the development of a strategy of appeasement that is problematic for neorealists. This strategy is distinct from that of Vietnam. Despite hard lessons learned at the hands of the larger power and clear balancing behavior in the South China Sea, Vietnam's actions on the Mekong have yet to coalesce into a pattern predictable for neorealists. Conversely, both countries follow similar approaches through their use of institutions that increase their leverage and level the playing field with the much more powerful China.

A. EVALUATING THE NEOREALIST HYPOTHESIS

The first hypothesis held that based on similar requirements for the river and increased Chinese control, the two smaller countries should essentially adhere equally to the standard balancing behavior predicted by many neorealist scholars. The research has found that this expectation holds in the Cambodian case but not in the Vietnamese one. Though the overall strategies of both Cambodia and Vietnam demonstrate the interests-based decision-making patterns that mark the neorealist framework, their individual responses to Chinese activities on the Mekong are quite distinct. In the case of Cambodia, the trade-off of economic assistance provided by China in exchange for Cambodian political support is indicative of Cambodia's willingness to place short-term interests ahead of long-term requirements for riparian productivity. Receiving as much as half of its gross domestic product since 2007 from Chinese foreign aid, Cambodian leadership has quickly created a culture of dependency on Chinese goodwill that has become the most important factor in its foreign policy.²¹³ This patron-client relationship has enabled the ruling Cambodian People's Party to remain in power by facilitating the country's economic growth. Unfortunately for the Cambodian people dependent upon the Mekong, Cambodia's strategy of appeasement has also had significant impacts on Cambodia's ability to make foreign policy decisions absent Chinese approval.

Thus, far, this strategy has worked in China's favor as demonstrated by the absence of Cambodian formal objection to China's efforts to control the Mekong River.

²¹³ Ear, "Political Economy of Aid," 74; Heng, "Cambodia-China Relations," 77.

Many neorealist scholars describe this strategy of appeasement as a dangerous, self-defeating strategy, where a “threatened state will make concessions to an aggressor,” in an effort to gain favor with the greater power.²¹⁴ Rather than confront unilateral Chinese actions on the Mekong directly, Cambodia has pursued a two-sided approach that attempts to appease the super power while simultaneously using institutions to increase its ability to shape China’s actions.

In contrast to Cambodia, Vietnam has not engaged in either balancing or bandwagoning in response to China’s actions on the Mekong. Despite the river’s importance to the Vietnamese, research finds little evidence that Vietnam has followed an approach consistent within the neorealist framework. Importantly, Vietnamese actions toward Chinese activities on the Mekong stand in sharp distinction to its actions on the South China Sea where a historically aggressive and increasingly assertive China has triggered a systemic pattern of Vietnamese balancing behavior in response. This behavior is identified in several ways. First, Vietnamese defense spending has increased by more than 128 percent since 2005.²¹⁵ Increased funding has enhanced Vietnam’s military capabilities and includes advanced surveillance systems and naval patrol vessels from the U.S. and advanced submarines from Russia.²¹⁶ When used together, these new capabilities can help deter Chinese expansion and stop heavy-handed intimidation tactics by Chinese naval vessels.²¹⁷ Described as “internal balancing” by Mearsheimer, Vietnam’s efforts at self-improvement pair with a strengthening of ties with the West. Numerous visits by high-level U.S. officials, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2012 and President Obama in 2015, have facilitated increased defense and security cooperation and indicate Vietnam’s desire to recruit additional partners outside of China’s influence.

²¹⁴ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power*, 163.

²¹⁵ John Boudreau, “Vietnam Goes Shopping for U.S. Military Hardware,” *Bloomberg*, May 14, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-13/vietnam-turns-to-u-s-to-buy-weapons-40-years-after-war-s-end>.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Carlyle Thayer, “Russian Subs in Vietnam,” *U.S. Naval Institute News*, August 20, 2012, <https://news.usni.org/2012/08/20/russian-subs-vietnam>.

B. EVALUATING THE NEOLIBERAL HYPOTHESIS

The second hypothesis held that smaller states use regional and international institutions to create mechanisms to increase state cooperation, establish norms, and on occasion, provide coercive force to shape state behavior. This thesis has found that this institutional approach is indeed used by both Cambodia and Vietnam to influence China and shape the larger state's actions—albeit for slightly different reasons in each case. Described as a means for “China's weaker partners to improve their positions vis-à-vis Beijing through collective bargaining,” institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations provide smaller states with the ability to gain leverage on key issues they would be unable to bilaterally.²¹⁸ As Chinese power has grown, these smaller states have increased their support for these institutions. Furthermore, these same smaller Southeast Asian states frequently attempt to include China. In convincing China to join institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asia Summit, states like Cambodia and Vietnam seek to “bind China in a web of cooperative relations,” that they hope will facilitate cooperation and limit China's foreign policy options that run counter to the institutions' desires.²¹⁹

In the case of Cambodia, institutions enable it to counter China in an indirect manner without suffering the blowback that frequently occurs when states confront China directly. The high levels of dependence Cambodia has on China's economic assistance limit that states ability to challenge Chinese initiatives when they diverge from Cambodia's interests. In these instances, institutions such as the Mekong River Commission provide Cambodia an outlet to shape its preferences and are useful in giving it the anonymity it needs to preserve its relationship with the Chinese cash cow.

Rather than using institutions in an effort to avoid blowback as Cambodia has done, Vietnam uses them because of the increased leverage they provide. This extra leverage enables Vietnam to confront China on a variety of issues. For example, Vietnam's use of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2010 to “internationalize the South China

²¹⁸ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 38.

²¹⁹ Thayer, “Tyranny of Geography,” 352.

Sea issue and resume sessions of the ASEAN-China Joint Working Group to implement the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC),” significantly advanced Vietnamese interests.²²⁰ Minus this institutional advantage, it is unlikely China would have given either issue a second thought.

To protect their interests in the Mekong River, both Cambodia and Vietnam have placed their bets on the Mekong River Commission, having few better alternatives with which to shape Chinese behavior. Several shortfalls limit the institution’s ability to effect change. First, Chinese refusal to join the MRC has significantly handicapped the institution’s ability to change China’s behavior. To maintain maximum decision-making ability in its pursuit of hydroelectric energy, China has steadfastly denied MRC offers of membership, leaving it with no binding requirement to modify its behavior. Lacking an enforcement mechanism through which to compel behavior, the MRC has been forced to content itself with serving as a medium to promote “international cooperation, data collection, and environmental monitoring,” in an effort to ensure uniform protection of river interests among the institution’s four member nations.²²¹

Despite these weaknesses, the MRC has had some modest success that explains why both Cambodia and Vietnam continue to look to the institution to help manage their interests on the river. Of most importance is the collective nature of the institution as demonstrated by Chinese release of water during the 2016 drought. Bilaterally, neither Cambodia nor Vietnam likely expected to compel China to release water. However, when faced with the combined influence of the MRC’s four members, the problem for China became regional rather than local. Quickly acquiescing following the MRC’s request despite claiming it needed the water for its own purposes, China’s response proved the viability of the MRC as an institution.

C. IMPLICATIONS

Chinese control of the Tibetan Plateau and its asymmetric relationship with downstream states poses countless problems for its neighbors but, within these problems,

²²⁰ Thayer, “Tyranny of Geography,” 352.

²²¹ Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, 26.

lies opportunity for the United States and its initiatives in the region. Many perceive China's preference to deal bilaterally rather than multilaterally with its neighbors as an attempt to "divide and conquer" smaller, weaker states.²²² These smaller states are made even more fearful by China's increasing territorial assertiveness, such as its actions in the South China Sea or on the Mekong demonstrate. The growing dissent these actions have caused its smaller states has created a chink in China's armor ripe for exploitation.

Future U.S. administrations can capitalize upon this growing dissent in two ways. First, institutions, particularly those with active U.S. membership, will likely provide the most effective means of countering Chinese initiatives and shaping Chinese behavior. In the Mekong Basin, two such institutions already exist. As part of a broader U.S. strategy begun by the Obama Administration, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) was created to advance cooperation and capacity building in the Lower Mekong River Basin and includes Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand.²²³ Together with the partnering of the U.S. Mississippi River Commission with the MRC, U.S. influence has rapidly expanded and offers Southeast Asian states a much-needed alternative to a China that many of them fear. However, the United States must maintain momentum in these institutions to maintain influence. Already Chinese efforts to counter have had some success as the aforementioned Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Initiative shows.

Second, the U.S. must maintain the current trend of senior leader engagement in the region begun by the Obama Administration. The assignment in 2011 of a permanent resident ambassador to ASEAN was a crucial step in legitimizing the institution and demonstrated U.S. resolve in the region. Likewise, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2012 visit of the Mekong River, Vietnam, and Cambodia to discuss issues there was a first of its kind state visit that facilitated the implementation of the above initiatives. Followed three years later by a visit from President Obama, the high level focus on the region continues to pay dividends for U.S. interests there. However, the Obama Administration's success will be for naught unless follow on administrations apply the

²²² Chellaney, *Water*, 302.

²²³ Ernest Z. Bower, "U.S. Moves to Strengthen ASEAN by Boosting the Lower Mekong Initiative," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 24, 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-moves-strengthen-asean-boosting-lower-mekong-initiative>.

same zealous approach. Ultimately, the U.S. ability to achieve its objectives in the region will rest upon the amount of leadership it decides to show. Should it go into hibernation in Southeast Asia once again, a waiting China will quickly fill the leadership vacuum.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For a completely different perspective that focuses on power politics, subsequent students interested in Southeast Asia, or transnational riparian conflict, should look to Cambodia and Vietnam's actions toward Laos as it begins the process of damming the main stem of the Mekong. Laos' construction of the Xayaburi and the Don Sahong dams poses an interesting problem for Cambodia and Vietnam. Lacking China's immense size and power advantages, Laos is far more vulnerable to blowback from either state. As the case of the Israeli-Arab Six Day War shows, stronger states are far more likely to take action against weaker states when their riparian interests are threatened than vice versa. What remains to be seen is just how far Cambodia and Vietnam will go to protect their interests on the Mekong River.

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